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THE FURTHER SKY
A Complete Short Novel
By Keith Laumer

SF Profile:
Philip José Farmer



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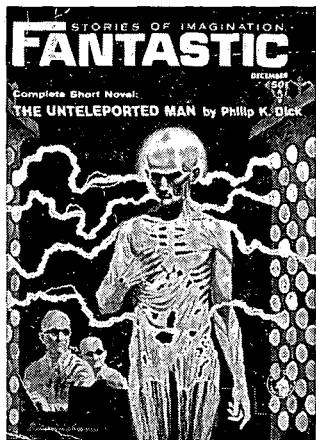
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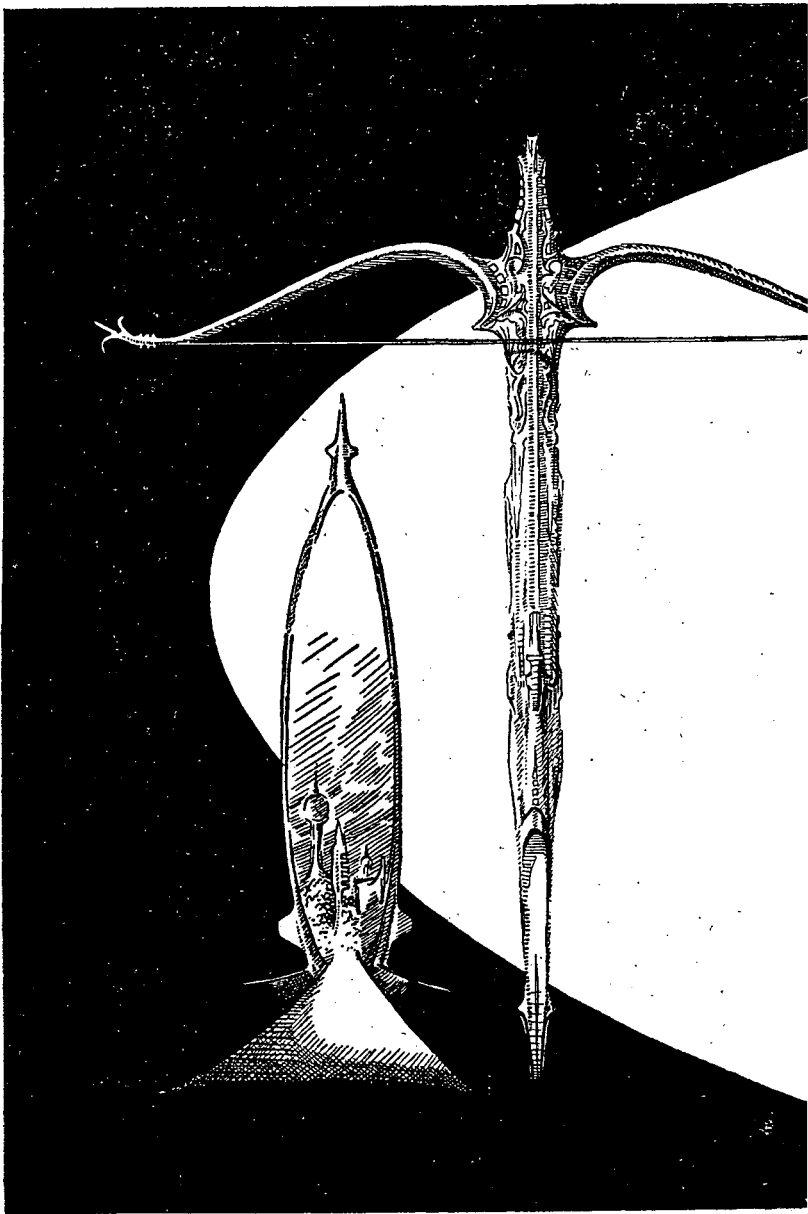
editorial

WITH the article in this issue on Philip José Farmer, the series of *SF Profiles* by Sam Moskowitz is midway in its fourth year. By and large, the Profiles have been well received. Perhaps the major comment (complaint?) we get about them is along the lines of "Why don't you write about. . . ." and then come the names like Poul Anderson or Gordon Dickson or Brian Aldiss or ——— (fill in your own choice). Well, the answer to that, says Moskowitz, is that he hesitates to try to sum up the career of a man, or that person's influence on science-fiction, while that career is still in full flight.

But in discussing the future of the *Profile* series recently, the author and the editors came to the conclusion that an opportunity existed to do something that has seldom, if ever, been done. That is: to consider science fiction's handling (or non-handling) of sociological subject-areas—prejudice, sex, religion, war.

To crystallize psycho-social trends in science-fiction, it was further agreed that any outstanding practitioner of any single trend could be profiled at the same time as his subject-matter was analyzed. Thus, the profile on Farmer on page 104 is subtitled: Sex and Science-Fiction.

We hope you will like this new approach, because we have several others already in the works. At the same time, however, we are not forgetting the basic interest in the s-f writer himself. This is no place to give away editorial secrets, but we can tell you that future issues will discuss s-f in other countries; bring you a long-lost "original" s-f story by a forgotten master; critically examine the Fortean; and do an "umbrella" coverage of a group of "skyrocket" type s-f writers which, Moskowitz says, he thinks should be titled, "*How To Make 20 Enemies in One Article.*" So, for fun and games, stick with us. —NL.



There are Shangri-Las in Space, too . . . For instance, through a Portal on Pluto lies Fair Galialie . . . and through another Portal there lies the mind-shaking truths that live under . . .

The Further Sky

By KEITH LAUMER

Illustrated by ADRAGNA

IT was late. The third level walk-away was deserted except for a lone Niss standing under the glare of a polyarc fifty feet ahead. Vallant hurried along, only half-listening to the voice of the newser from the tiny tri-D set he carried:

“ . . . perturbation in the motion of Pluto. The report from the Survey Party confirms that the ninth planet has left its orbit and is falling toward the Sun. Dr. Vetenskap, expedition head, said that no explanation can be offered for the phenomena. Calculations indicate that although Pluto will cross the orbit of the Earth in approximately forty-five years, an actual collision is unlikely;

however serious consequences could follow a close passage of the body . . . ”

Vallant turned the audio up. Ahead, the immobile Niss was staring at him with small red eyes.

“ . . . inexplicable disappearance from Pluto of a Survey scouting vessel,” the newser was saying. “The boat’s crew, operating in the northern hemisphere of the uninhabited planet, had left it in order to take Solar observations; the stranded men, rescued after a three-day ordeal, stated that they observed the scout to rise, apparently under full control, and ascend to extreme altitude before being lost from view. The boat was fully

fueled, and capable of an extended voyage. The Patrol is on the look-out for the stolen vessel, but so far—"

As Vallant came abreast of the waiting Niss, it moved suddenly into his path, reached out a four-fingered parody of a human hand, twitched the set from his grip and with a convulsive motion, crushed it flat.

"Here, what the devil—" Vallant started. But the Niss had already tossed the ruin aside, turned away to resume its immobile stance under the glare of the light.

Vallant stared at the creature, the dusty grey-green hide, furrowed like an alligator's, the flaccid crest that drooped over one pin-point eye, the dun-colored tunic and drab leather straps that hung loosely on the lean, five-foot body.

He took a step; the Niss turned its narrow head to face him. The tiny eyes glittered like rubies.

"Why did you smash my Tri-deo?" Vallant said angrily.

The Niss stared for a moment longer; then it opened its mouth—a flash of snow-white in the gloom—and flicked a tongue like a scarlet worm past snake-teeth in an unmistakable gesture.

Vallant doubled a fist. Instantly, the Niss flipped back the corner of its hip-length cape, exposing the butt of a pistol-like ap-

paratus with a flared muzzle.

Vallant locked eyes with the alien; the words of the ten-times-daily public service announcement came back to him:

"Remember—it is our privilege to welcome the Niss among us as honored guests, who share their vast knowledge with us freely, to the betterment of all mankind."

The Niss stood, waiting. Vallant, fists still clenched, turned and walked away.

AT the door to his apartment block Vallant took out his electro-key, pressed it in the slot. From behind him there was a tiny sound, a whistling cough. Vallant turned; a wizened face on a turkey neck peered at him.

"Ame," a voice as thin as smoke said. "Lord, boy, you look wonderful..." The old man came closer, stood round-shouldered, one veined hand clutching the lapels of an oddly-cut coat. A few strands of wispy, colorless hair crossed the age-freckled skull. White stubble covered the sagging cheeks; the pale lines of old scars showed against the crepy skin.

"Guess you don't know me, Ame..."

"I can't say that I do," Vallant said. "What—"

"That's all right, Ame; no way you could, I guess..." The old man held out a hand that trem-

bled like a leaf in a gentle breeze. "We served in the Navy together; we've been through a lot. But you don't know. It's been a long time..." the wrinkled face twisted into an unreadable expression. "Longer than you'd think."

Vallant shook his head. "You must have me confused with someone else, old timer. I've never been in the Navy."

The old man nodded as though Vallant had agreed with him. "There's a lot you need to know about. That's why I came. I had to, you see? Because if I didn't, why, who knows what might happen?"

"I don't—"

"Look, Ame," the old man cut in urgently, "could we go inside?" He glanced both ways along the walkaway. "Before one of those green devils shows his ugly face..."

Vallant looked at the old man. "You mean the Niss?"

The old eyes were bright. "That's who I mean; but don't you worry, boy; we'll take care of them—"

"That's careless talk, grandad. The Syndarch frowns on unfriendly remarks about our honored guests." Vallant opened the door. "You'd better come inside."

In Vallant's flat, the old man stared around. "Strange, Ame..." he shook his head. "But I've got no time now to waste thinking about that. There's things

we've got to do..." He fumbled in his coat. "I need help..."

"If you're a former Navy man, the Society will take care of you," Vallant said.

"Not money; I've got all that I need." He took out a much-folded paper, opened it with shaking hands, handed it across to Vallant. It was a map, creased and patched, grimy and oil-spattered. The legend in the corner read:

TERRESTRIAL SPACE ARM
—POLAR PROJECTION. Sol
IX March 2212.

The old man leaned, pointing. "See this spot right here? A river cuts through the mountains—a river of liquid nitrogen. The gorge is a thousand feet deep—and the falls come thundering down out of the sky like the end of the world. That's the place, Ame. They'd kill to get it, make no mistake—and that'd be only the beginning."

"Who'd kill?"

"The sneaking, filthy, Niss, boy—who else?" the old man's voice snapped with an echo of youthful authority. "They trailed me in, of course. You heard about the stolen Survey boat?"

Vallant frowned. "You mean the one that disappeared on Pluto?"

The ancient head nodded quickly. "That's right, that was me. Lucky, them coming down like they did. Otherwise, I'd have had another thirty-odd years to

wait. Might not of made it. I figured to lose them but I'm getting old; not as sharp as I used to be. I killed one an hour ago. Don't know how long I've got—"

"You *killed* a Niss?"

"Not the first one, either." The old man's toothless grin was cheerful. "Now, what I have to tell you, Ame—"

"Look . . ." Vallant's voice was low. "I won't turn you in—but you can't stay here. God knows I have no use for the Niss, but killing one—"

The old man looked into Vallant's face, searchingly. "You *are* Amory Vallant . . .?"

"That's right. I don't know how you know my name, but—"

"Look here, Ame. I know it's hard to understand. And I guess I wander; getting old . . ." He fumbled over his pockets, brought out a warped packet, paper-wrapped, passed it over to Vallant.

"Go ahead—take a look."

VALLANT unfolded the wrappings, took out a once-glossy tri-D photo. It showed a line of men in regulation ship-suits standing against a curving wall of metal. The next was a shot of a group of boyish-faced men in identical Aerospace blue blouses, sitting at a long table, forks raised toward mouths. In another, two men stood on a stormy hillside scattered with the smok-

ing fragment of a wrecked ship.

Vallant looked up, puzzled. "What—"

"Look closer, Ame. Look at the faces." The old man's bony finger reached, indicated a man in a worn uniform, looking down at torn metal. He had a lean face, short-cropped sandy hair, deep-set eyes—

"Hey!" Vallant said. "That looks like me!"

"Uh-huh. In the other ones, too . . ." The old man crouched forward, watching Vallant's face as he shuffled through the pictures. There he was—standing on the bridge of a capital ship, clip-board in hand; leaning on a bar, holding a glass, an arm over the shoulders of a square-faced red-headed man; posing stiffly before a bazaar stall manned by a sullen Niss with his race's unfortunate expression of permanent guilt stamped on the grey-green features.

Vallant stared at the old man. "I've never been in the Navy—I never saw the inside of a ship of the line—I was never on the Niss-world . . .!" He flipped through the remaining pictures. "Here's one where I've got grey hair and a commodore's star! How the devil did you fake these up, old-timer?"

"They're no fakes, Ame. Look there—that red-headed young fellow—do you know him?"

Vallant studied the picture. "I

have a friend named Able; Jason Able—at Unitech; we're both students there. This looks like him—only older."

The old man was nodding, grinning. "That's right, Ame. Jase Able." The grin faded abruptly. "But I didn't come here to talk about old times—"

"Is he a relative of yours?"

"Not exactly. Listen; My boat; they got it. Didn't have time to camouflage it like I planned. It's at the Granyauck Navy Yard now: I saw it yesterday. We've got to have that boat, Ame; it's the fastest model there is—you know how to handle her?"

"I guess so—I'm an Astronautics major. But hold on a minute. How do you know me? And where did you get those pictures? What's the map all about? Why did you kill a Niss—and what's this about a boat? You know the Syndarch outlawed private space travel thirty years ago . . . !"

"Hold on, Ame . . ." The old man wiped a trembling hand across his forehead. "I guess I'm going too fast—but I have to hurry. There's no time—"

"Start with the boat. Are you saying you stole it and came here from Pluto?"

"That's right, Ame. I—"

"That's impossible. Nobody could stay alive on Pluto. And anyway the Patrol or the Niss would stop any ship—"

"It's the same thing; the Syndarch is just the traitors that made peace with the Niss after the War—"

"War?"

"You don't even know about the War, do you?" The old man looked confused. "So much to tell, Ame—and no time. We've got to hurry. The War—not much of a fight to it; it was maybe thirty years ago; our ships were just starting their probes out beyond Big Jupe. The Niss hit us; rolled us up like a rug. What the Hell, we didn't have a chance; our ships were nothing but labs, experimental models, unarmed. The Niss offered a deal. Ramo took 'em up on it. The public never even knew. Now the Niss have occupied Earth for twenty-five years—"

"Occupied! But . . . they're supposed to be our honored guests—"

"That's the Syndarch line. As for why I came back, I had to, Ame. I had to tell you about Galhale and the Portal—"

"Slow down, old fellow; start at the beginning—"

"I could have stayed . . ." the old man's eyes were distant, the present forgotten. "But I couldn't chance it . . ." he seemed to pull himself together with an effort. "And anyway, I kind of missed the old life; there's no place for ship-boots in fairyland."

THERE was a buzz from the front entry. The old man struggled to his feet, stared around the room, his lips working. "They're here already. I thought I'd thrown 'em off; I thought I was clear . . ."

"Hold on, old timer; it's probably just a friend; sit down—"

"Any back way out of here, Ame?" The old man's eyes were desperate. From the door, the buzz sounded insistently.

"You think it's the police?"

"It's them or the Niss. I know, boy."

Vallant hesitated a moment, then went quickly to the bedroom, into the closet, felt over the wall. A panel dropped, fell outward; a framed opening showed dark beyond it.

"I discovered this when they were doing some work on the other side; it's one advantage of cracker-box construction. I phoned in a complaint, but they never fixed it. It opens into a utility room in the Municipal Admin block."

The old man hurried forward. "I'm sorry I got you into this, Ame. I won't come here again—you come to my place—the Stellar Castle on 900th—room 1196b. I've been away two days now. I've got to get back—Don't tell 'em anything—and be sure you're not followed. I'll be waiting." He ducked through the opening.

From the next room, there was

the sound of heavy pounding—then of splintering plastic. Vallant hastily clipped the panel back in place, turned as a thick, dark man with an egg-bald head slammed through the doorway. He wore tight-cuffed black trousers and there was a bright-metal servitude bracelet with a Syndarch escutcheon on his left wrist. His small, coal-black eyes darted around the room.

"Where's the old man?" he rapped out in a voice like bullets hitting a plank.

"Who are you? What's the idea of smashing my door?"

"You know the penalty for aiding a traitor to the Syndarch?" The intruder went past Vallant, stared around the room.

"There's nobody here," Vallant said. "And even the Syndarch has no right to search without a warrant."

The bald man eyed Vallant.

"You telling me what rights the Syndarch's got? He barked a short laugh, cut it off suddenly to glare coldly at Vallant.

"Watch your step. We'll be watching you now." Beyond the door, Vallant caught a glimpse of a dull Niss face.

"That reminds me," he said. "The Niss owe me a Tri-D set; one of them smashed mine today."

The beady eyes bored into him. "Yeah," the Syndarch man said. "We'll be watching you." He

stepped past the smashed door.

As soon as he was gone, Vallant went to the closet and removed the panel.

2

VALLANT stepped through the opening, fitted the panel back in place, felt his way past brooms and cans of cleaning compound, eased the door open, emerged into a dim-lit corridor. Lights showed behind a few doors along its shadowy length. He went toward a red exit light; a lone maintenance man shot him a sour look but said nothing. He pushed out through a rotating door onto the littered walkaway, went to a nearby lift, rode up to the fifty level, took the cross-town walkaway to the shabby section near the Gendye Tower. Here, near the center of the city, there were a few pedestrians out; a steady humming filled the air from the wheelways above. Between them, Vallant caught a glimpse of a bleary moon gleaming unnoticed in the remote sky.

It took Vallant half an hour to find the dark sideway where a dowdy plastic front adorned with a tarnished sunburst huddled between later, taller structures whose lower levels were darkened by the blight that washed about the bases of the city's towers like an overflowing sewer. Vallant stepped through a wide glass

door that opened creakily before him, crossed to the dust-grimed directory, keyed the index; out-of-focus print flickered on the screen. Jason Able was registered in room 1196b.

Vallant stepped into the ancient mechanical lift; its door closed tiredly. Everything about the Stellar Castle seemed ready to sigh and give up.

On the hundred and tenth floor he stepped out, followed arrows to a warped plastic door against which dull fluorescent numerals gleamed faintly. He tapped; the door swung inward. He stepped inside.

It was a mean, narrow room with one crowded, dirt-glazed window, opening on an air-shaft through which the bleak light of a polyarc filtered. There was a bunk bed, unmade, a wall locker with its door ajar, its shelves empty; and beyond, a tiny toilet cubicle. A hinge-sprung suitcase lay near the bed; next to it, the single chair lay overturned. Vallant rounded the bed. The old man lay on his back on the floor. The waxy face, thin-nosed, sunken-cheeked, stared up at him with eyes as remote as a statue of Pharaoh.

Vallant touched the bony wrist; it was cool and inert as modelling clay. The packet of pictures lay scattered on the floor. Vallant felt inside the coat; the map was gone. He went to the

locker; there was a covered bird-cage on its floor among curls of dust, a small leather case beside it. He checked the suitcase; it contained worn garments of strange cut, a leather folder with six miniature medals, a few more edge-crempled photos, a toy cross-bow, beautifully made, and a Browning 2 mm needler.

A tiny sound brought Vallant upright; he reached for the needler, searching the gloom. From somewhere above him, a soft scraping sounded. Among the shadows under the ceiling, two tiny amber lights glinted; something small and dark moved. Vallant flipped the pistol's safety off—

A shape no bigger than a cat dropped to the bed with an almost noiseless thump.

"You are Jason's friend," a piping voice said. "Did you come to help me?"

3

IT was almost man-shaped, with large eyes which threw back crimson highlights, oversized fox-like ears, a sharp nose; it wore form-fitting clothing of a dark olive color which accentuated its thin limbs and knobby joints. Dark hair grew to a widow's peak on its forehead.

"What are you?" Vallant's voice was a hoarse whisper.

"I'm Jimper." The tiny voice

was like the peeping of a chick. "The Not-men came. Jason is dead; now who will help Jimper?" The little creature moved toward Vallant. There was a jaunty cap on the doll-sized head; a broken feather trailed from it.

"Who killed the old man?"

"Are you his friend?"

"He seemed to think so."

"There was a large man—great in the belly, and with splendid clothes, though he smelled of burning drug-weed. Two of the Not-men were with him. They struck Jason a mighty blow, and afterward they took things from his clothes. I was afraid; I hid among the rafters."

"What are you—a pet?"

The little creature stood straighter.

"I am the Ambassador of the king. I came with Jason to see the king of the Giants."

Vallant pocketed the gun. I've been to a lot of places; I never saw anything like you before. Where did you come from?"

"My land of Galliale lies beyond the Place of Blue Ice—the world you know as Pluto."

"Pluto? Out there the atmosphere falls as snow every winter. Nothing could live there."

"Green and fair lies Galliale beyond the ice." The little figure crept closer to the foot of the bed. "Jason is dead. Now Jimper is alone. Let me stay with you, Jason's friend."



THE FURTHER SKY

15

"Sorry, I don't need a pet."

"I am the Ambassador of the King!" the mannikin piped. "Do not leave me alone," he added, his tiny voice no more than a cricket's chirp.

"Do you know why they killed the old man?"

"He knew of the Portal—and my land of Galliale. Long have the Not-men sought it—"

The tiny head came up suddenly; the long nose twitched. "The Not-men," the bird voice shrilled. "They come . . . !"

Vallant stepped to the door, listened. "I don't hear anything."

"They come—from below. Three of them, and evil are their thoughts."

"You're a mind-reader, too?"

"I feel the shapes of their intentions . . ." the tiny voice was frantic. "Flee, Jason's friend; they wish you harm . . ."

"What about you?"

"Jason made a carrying box for me—there—in the locker."

Vallant grabbed up the cage, put it on the bed; the Ambassador of the king crept inside.

"My cross-bow," he called; "it lies in Jason's box; and my knapsack."

Vallant retrieved the miniature weapon and the box, handed them in to their owner.

"All right, Jimper. I'm not sure I'm not dreaming you—but I'd hate to wake up and find out I wasn't."

"Close are they now," the small voice shrilled. "They come from there . . ." He pointed along the gloomy hallway. Vallant went in the opposite direction. He glanced back from the first cross-corridor; three Niss stepped from the elevator; he watched as they went to the room he had just left, pushed inside.

"It looks as though you know what you're talking about, Jimper," Vallant said. "Let's get away from here before the excitement begins."

4

THERE were a scattering of late-shift workers hurrying through the corridor when Vallant reached the secret entry to his flat. He waited until they had hustled out of sight, then opened the utility room door, stepped inside. In the cage, Jimper moaned softly.

"The Feared Men," he peeped.

Vallant stood stock-still. He put his ear against the removable panel. A heavy voice sounded from beyond it.

"How did I know he'd die so easy? I had to make him talk, didn't I?"

"Fool!" hissed a voice like gas escaping under pressure. "Little will he talk now."

"Look, your boss isn't going to blame me, is he?"

"You will die, and I with you."

"Huh? You mean—just because—"

There was a sudden hiss, then a sound of rattling paper. "Perhaps this will save our lives," the Niss voice said. "The map . . . !"

In the cage, Jimper whined. "I fear the Not-men," he piped. "I fear the smell of hate."

Vallant raised the cage to eye-level. The little creature inside blinked large, anxious eyes at him. "They found the old man's map," he said. "He had it in his pocket. Was it important?"

"The map? Jimper stood, gripping the bars of the cage. "Vallant—with the map they can seek out my Land of Galliale, and fall upon us, unsuspecting! They must not have it!"

"They've already got it—and if I'd walked in the front door, they'd have had me too. I'm in trouble, Jimper. I've got to get away, hide out somewhere . . .

"First, the map, Vallant!"

"What do you mean?"

"We must take it from them. You are a giant, like them; can you not burst in and take it from them?"

"I'm afraid heroics are out of my line, Jimper. Sorry, but—"

"Jason died for the map, Vallant. He came to warn you, and they killed him. Will you let them take it now?"

Vallant rubbed his jaw. "I've gotten mixed up in something I don't understand. I don't know

the old man; he never got around to saying why he came to see me—"

"To save a world, Vallant—perhaps a Galaxy. And now only you can help!"

"The map is that important, is it?"

"More than you could know! You must make a plan, Vallant!"

Vallant nodded. "I guess my number's up anyway; I'd never get clear of the city, with the Syndarch and the Niss after me. I might as well go down fighting." He chewed his lip. "Listen, Jimper. I want you to sneak around front, with my key. You can reach the key-hole if you climb up on the railing. When you plug it in, the buzzer will go. Then I'll move in and hit them on the flank. Maybe I can put it over. Can you do it?"

Jimper looked out through the brass bars of the birdcage. "It is a fearsome thing to walk abroad among the giants . . ." He gripped his five-inch cross-bow. "But if you ask it, Vallant, I will try."

"Good boy." Vallant put the cage on the floor, opened it. Jimper stepped out, stood looking up at the man. Briefly, Vallant described the location of his apartment entry; he handed over the electro-key.

"Be careful; there may be somebody watching the place from outside. If you make it, give it one good blast and run like

hell; I'll meet you back here. If I don't show up in ten minutes, you're on your own."

Jimper stood straight; he settled his cap on his head.

"I am the Ambassador of the King," he said. "I shall do my best, Vallant."

VALLANT waited, his ear to the thin panel. The two who lay in wait inside conversed excitedly, in low tones.

"Look," the man said. "The guy's wise we're after him. He won't come back here; we've got to get the map to the Syndarch —"

"To the Uttermagnate!"

"The Syndarch's *my* boss—"

"He is as the dirt beneath the talons of the Uttermagnate!"

Faintly, the door buzzer sounded. The voices ceased abruptly. Then:

"OK, you cover him as he comes in; I clip him back of the ear . . ."

Vallant waited a quarter of a minute; then he pushed on the panel, caught it as it leaned into the room, stepped in after it, the gun in his hand. He crossed quickly to the connecting doorway to the outer room. The man and the Niss stood across the room on either side of the entry, heads cocked alertly; the alien held a gun, the man a heavy sap.

"Don't move!" Vallant snapped.

The two whirled on him like clockwork soldiers. Vallant jumped aside, fired as the Niss burned the door-frame by his ear. The Browning snarled; the alien slammed back, fell, a cluster of needles bright against the leathery hide. The man dropped the length of weighted hose, raised his hands.

"Don't shoot . . .!" he choked. Vallant went to him, lifted the map from his pocket.

"Talk fast!" Vallant snapped. "Who's the old man?"

"All I know is," the man stutted, "the Niss boss said bring the old guy in."

"You tailed him here, but he lost you. How'd you get to him?"

"There was four teams working him. Mullo picked him up on One Level."

"Why'd you kill him?"

"It was an accident—"

"Why'd you come back for me?"

"Once the old guy was dead, you was the only lead . . ."

"Lead to what?"

Sweat popped out on the man's veined temples. He had a narrow, horsey face, a long torso with too-short legs.

"I . . . dunno. It was something they wanted."

"You take orders from . . . those?" Vallant glanced at the dead Niss.

"I do like I'm told," the man said sullenly.

"You know any prayers?"

The man's face broke like smoke in a gust of wind. He fell to his knees, clasped his hands in a grotesque parody of adoration. He babbled. Vallant stood over him.

"I ought to kill you—for my own protection," he said. "But that's where you skunks have the advantage . . ." He hit the man hard behind the ear with the gun-butt; he fell on his face. Vallant trussed him with a maroon bathrobe cord, knotted a handkerchief over his mouth, then rose, looked around at the laden book shelves, the music storage unit, the well-stocked pantry beyond.

"It was nice while it lasted," he muttered. He went to the closet, stepped through into the dark room beyond.

"Jimper!" he called. There was no answer. The cage was empty, the tiny knapsack beside it. He picked it up, stepped out into the corridor, went to the exit, out into the walkaway, turned back toward the entrance to the apartment block.

As he passed the dark mouth of a narrow service-way, a sudden thump! sounded, followed by a squeal like a rusty hinge. Vallant whirled; a giant rat lay kicking long-toed hind feet, a three inch length of wooden dowel projecting from its chest. Beyond it lay a second rat, its yel-

low chisel-teeth closed on a shaft which had entered its mouth and emerged under its left shoulder. Vallant took a step into the alley; a foot-long rodent darted at him. He pivoted, swung a foot, sent it thudding against the wall, whirled in time to see Jimper, his back to the wall, loose a bolt from his bow, then toss the weapon aside and draw a two-inch dagger. A red-eyed rodent rushed him; he danced aside, struck—

Vallant snatched him up, aimed a kick at the predator, quickly retreated to the dim-lit walkaway.

"I'm sorry, Jimper; I forgot about the rats . . ."

"My . . . bow . . ." Jimper keened. His head drooped sideways. Vallant was suddenly aware of the lightness of the small body; there seemed to be only bones under the silken-soft garments.

"How long since you've had a meal?"

"Jason gave Jimper food . . . before he went away . . ."

"You mean you waited there two days, in the dark, without food and water?"

Jimper stirred, tried to raise his head. "Jimper is tired . . ."

The elfin face was greyish, the eyes hollow.

"You've had a tough time, partner."

Vallant walked back up the alley, recovered the cross-bow. The

rats were gone—even the two dead ones, dragged away by their fellows.

"I'll get you some food," Vallant said; "then maybe you can tell me what this is all about."

"Then . . . you will help Jimper?"

"I don't know, Jimper. I just killed a Niss, and gave a Syndarch man a severe headache. I'm afraid I've permanently spoiled my popularity in this area. I have a couple of hours maybe before they find them. That means I'll have to make some very hurried travel arrangements. Afterwards we can discuss future plans—if we still have any."

5

VALLANT stood in the angle of the security wall surrounding the Navy Yard, sheltered from the glare of the polyarcs. "Do you know which one it is?" he whispered.

"Well I know her, Vallant; a fleet vessel; none can match her."

"Point her out to me." He lifted the cage to a shed roof, scrambled up beside it. Over the wall-top, the lights threw back dull highlights from the tarnished hulls of three Syndarch hundred-tonners squatting in an irregular row. Beyond, half a dozen of the Syndarch's private racing stable were parked, their peeling decorative paint giving them a raffish

air. Far to the right, Jimper pointed to a smaller vessel, agleam with chromalloy and enamel, glistening under the polyarcs. Men worked around it; nearby stood four armed men in the pale green of the Syndarch contract police.

"I'll have to take some chances now," Vallant said softly. "You'd better stay here; I won't be able to look out for you."

"I will look out for myself, Vallant!"

"All right, partner; but this will be risky."

"What will you do, Vallant?" Jimper's voice was a mouse's squeak, but he stood with a bold stance, looking up at Vallant.

"I'm going to waltz into Operations as though I owned a controlling interest, and see what happens. Keep your fingers crossed."

"Jimper will be near, Vallant. Good luck."

Vallant stooped, put out a hand. "Thanks, partner—and if I don't make it, good luck to you—and your land of Galliale." Jimper laid his tiny hand solemnly against Vallant's palm.

"Stout heart," he piped, "and fair hunting."

VALLANT strode through the gate, walking briskly like a man intent on serious business. A Niss eyed him from a sentry box by the gate as he rounded the

end of a building, went up steps, pushed through wide doors, went along a carpeted corridor and under an archway into a bright room with chart-lined walls. A fat man with a high, pink forehead looked up from behind a counter, glanced at Vallant, let his bored gaze wander past. Vallant rapped smartly on the counter.

"A little service here, please, my man. I need a clearance order; I'm taking a boat out."

The fat man's eyes flicked back to Vallant. He plucked a plastic toothpick from a breast pocket, plied it on large, square teeth. "So who're you?" he inquired in an uncoiled tenor.

"I'm the Syndarch's new pilot," Vallant said coldly. He wiped a finger across the dusty counter, examined its tip distastefully. "I trust that meets with your approval?"

There was an extended silence, broken only by the click of the fat man's toothpick.

"Nobody never tells me nothing," he stated abruptly. He turned, plucked a paper from a desk behind him, scribbled on it, tossed it at Vallant.

"Where's old man Ramo going this time?"

Vallant looked at him sharply. "Mind your tone, my man."

The toothpick fell with a tiny clatter. The fat man's face was suddenly strained. "Hey, I don't

mean nothing. I'm loyal, you bet." He indicated himself with an ink-stained thumb. "I just got kind of a ha ha informal way of talking."

"What was that lift-off time again?" Vallant said briskly.

"Plenty time yet, sir." The squeaky voice was half an octave higher. "I wasn't expecting the pilot in fer half a hour yet. I got my paper-work all set early, just in case, like. All you got to do, you got to sign the flight plan." The man pointed with the blue thumb. Vallant scribbled *Mort Furd* in the indicated space, folded his copy and tucked it away.

"About that crack," the fat man started.

"I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt," Vallant said.

OUTSIDE, Vallant walked quickly across to the low shed under the glare sign reading EQUIPMENT-STATION PERSONNEL ONLY. Inside, a small man with lined brown skin and artificial-looking black hair looked at him over a well-thumbed picto-news.

"I want to draw my gear," Vallant said briskly. "I'm taking the new boat out in a few minutes."

The little man got to his feet, held out a hand expectantly.

"Let's see that Issue Order."

"I'm running late," Vallant said. "I haven't got one."

The little man sat down and snatched up his paper. "Come back when you got one," he snapped.

"You wouldn't want to be the cause of delaying Leader Ramo's departure, would you?" Vallant looked at him pointedly.

"I do my job; no tickee no washee." The little man turned a page, appeared absorbed in his reading.

"Hey," Vallant said. The man glanced up, jaw lowered for a snappy retort. He saw the gun in Vallant's hand, froze, mouth open. Vallant plucked a length of wire from the table, tossed it to him. "Use this to tie your ankles together," he ordered. The magazine fell to the floor as the man complied. Vallant went behind him, cinched his hands with another length of stranded copper. He went along the bins, picked out a vacuum suit, pulled it on over his street clothes. He added an emergency power pack, a field communicator, emergency rations, a recycler unit.

Vallant stepped from the door—and was face to face with a heavily-built Niss holding a gun like the one Vallant had first seen at the hip of the alien who had smashed his Tri-D set.

"Would you mind pointing that thing in some other direction?" Vallant started to edge past the alien. It hissed, jabbed the strange gun at him.

Vallant took a deep breath, wondering how fast Niss reflexes were.

"Perhaps I'd better explain," he started—

There was a sharp clatter behind the alien; the narrow head jerked around; Vallant took a step, hit the creature on the side of the head; it bounced backwards, went down hard on its back; the gun skidded away. Vallant jumped to the Niss, caught it by the harness, dragged it into the shadow of the shed. Jimper stepped into view.

"Well smote, Vallant!" he chirped.

Your timing was perfect, partner!" Vallant looked toward the lighted ship. The ground crew was still at work, the guards lounging nearby.

"Here we go; make a wide swing. Wait until they're all admiring me, and then run for it." Vallant started across the open ramp with a long stride. A man with a clip-board strolled forward to meet him. Vallant flapped the Clearance Order at him.

"All set to lift?" he barked.

"Eh? Why, no; I haven't even run idling checks—" the man backed, keeping pace.

"Skip 'em; I'm in a hurry." Vallant brushed past, reached the access ladder, thumbed the lock control; it cycled open. A small figure bounded from shad-

ow, leaped up, disappeared inside.

"Hey—"

"Clear the area; I'm lifting!"

Vallant went up, swung through the open port, clanged it behind him, climbed up into the dim-lit control compartment, slid into the deep-padded acceleration couch, threw the shock frame in place.

"Get on the bunk, Jimper," he called. "Lie flat and hang on." He slammed switches. Pumps sprang into action; a whining built, merged with the rumble of preheat burners. The communicator light blinked garish red on the panel.

"You in the yacht," a harsh voice blared. "Furd, or whatever your name is—"

A Niagara of sound cut off the voice. The pressure of full emergency power crushed Vallant back in the seat. On the screen, the pattern of lights that was the port dwindled, became a smudge, then glided from view as the ship angled east, driving for Deep Space.

"We're clear, Jimper," Vallant called. "Now all we have to do is figure out where we're going..."

6

MARS was a huge, glaring disk of mottled pink, crumbling at the edge into blackness. It lit Jimper's face eerily as he

perched on the edge of the chart table, watching the planet swing ponderously past on the screen.

"Not this world, Vallant!" Jimper piped again. "Jason came with me from the world of the Blue Ice—"

"You said your country was warm and green, Jimper; with a big orange sun. Let's be realistic: Pluto is only a few degrees above absolute zero. Wherever this Galliale is, it couldn't be out there."

"You must believe Jimper, Vallant." The little creature looked appealingly across at the man. "We must go to Pluto!"

"Jimper, we need supplies, information. We'll land at Aresport, rest up, take in some of the scenery I've heard about, then see what we can find out about the old man's itinerary—"

"The Not-men will capture us!"

"Jimper, we couldn't be that important. Mars is an autonomous planet. I know commerce has been shut off for years, but the Syndarch couldn't have any influence out here—"

"Vallant—the Not-men own all the worlds! There are no Giants but those who serve them—but for those on Earth—and why they let them live, I cannot say —"

"You've got a lot of wild ideas, Jimper—"

"Look!" Jimper's finger point-

ed at the screen. A black point was visible, drifting across the center of the planetary disc. Vallant adjusted a control, locked a tracking beam on the vessel.

"If he holds that course, we're going to scrape paint . . . !" He keyed the communicator. "*Ariane* to Mars Tower West; I'm in my final approach pattern; request you clear the Sunday drivers out of the way."

"Pintail Red to Pintail One," a faint voice came from the speaker. "I think I've picked up our bogie; homing in on 23—268—6, sixteen kiloknots . . ."

"Pintail Red, get off the clear channel, you damned fool—" The angry voice dissolved into a blur of scrambled transmission.

"Panam Patrol—out here?" Vallant twiddled controls, frowning at the instruments. "What was that course? 23—268—6 . . ." He flipped a switch, read off the numerals which glowed on the ground glass.

"Hey, Jimper—that's us they're talking about . . . !"

A speck separated itself from the vessel on the screen, raced toward *Ariane*.

"Hang on to your hat, Jimper," Vallant called. "He means business . . ." He slammed the drive control lever full over; the ship leaped forward.

"I guess the Ares Pavilion's out, Jimper," he said between clenched teeth, "but maybe we

can find a cosy little family-type hotel on Ganymede."

7

VALLANT sagged over the control panel, his unshaven face hollow from the last week on short rations.

"*Ariane* to Ganymede Control," he croaked for the hundredth time. Ganymede Control, come in . . ."

"None will answer, Vallant," Jimper piped.

"Looks like nobody home, buddy," Vallant slumped back in the couch. "I don't understand it . . ."

"Will we go to Pluto now, Vallant?"

"You don't give up easily, do you, partner?"

Jimper sprang across, stood before Vallant, his feet planted on dial faces. "Vallant, my Land of Galliale lies beyond the snows, deep among the Blue Ice mountains. You must believe Jimper!"

"We're low on rations and my fuel banks were never intended for this kind of high-G running, weeks on end. We'll have to turn back."

"Turn back to what, Vallant? The Not-men will surely slay you—and what will happen to Jimper?"

"There's nothing out there, Jimper!" Vallant waved a hand at the screen that reflected the

blackness of space, and the cold glitter of the distant stars. "Nothing but some big balls of ice called Uranus and Neptune, and the sun's just a bright star."

"There is Pluto."

"So there is . . ." Vallant raised his head, looked into the small, anxious face. "Where could this nice warm place of yours be, Jimper? Underground?"

"The sky of Galliale is wide and blue, Vallant, and graced with a golden sun."

"If I headed out that way—and failed to find Galliale—that would be the end. You know that, don't you?"

"I know, Vallant. I will not lead you awrong."

"The old man said something about mountains of ice; maybe —" Vallant straightened. "Well, there's nothing to go back to. I've always had a yen to see what's out there. Let's go take a look, Jimper. Maybe there are still a few undreamed of things in Heaven and Earth—or beyond them."

8

THE planet hung like a dull-steel ball against the black; a brilliant highlight threw back the glinting reflection of the tiny disc that was the distant sun.

"All right, Jimper, guide me in," Vallant said hoarsely. "It all looks the same to me."

"When we are close, then I will know," Jimper's pointed nose seemed to quiver with eagerness as he stared into the screen. "Soon you will see, Vallant. Fair is my land of Galliale."

"I must be crazy to use my last few ounces of reaction mass to land on that," Vallant croaked. "But it's too late now to change my mind."

For the next hours, Vallant nursed the ship along, dropping closer to the icy world. Now plains of shattered ice-slabs stretched endlessly below, rising at intervals into jagged peaks gleaming metallically in light as eerie as an eclipse.

"There!" Jimper piped, pointing. "The Mountains of Blue Ice . . ." Vallant saw the peaks then, rising deep blue in a saw-tooth silhouette against the unending snow.

The proximity alarm clattered. Vallant pushed himself upright, read dials, adjusted the rear screen magnification. The squarish lines of a strange vessel appeared, dancing in the center of the field. Beyond, a second ship was a tiny point of reflected light.

"We're out of luck, partner," Vallant said flatly. "They must want us pretty badly."

"Make for the mountains, Vallant!" Jimper shrilled. "We can yet escape the Not-men!"

Vallant pulled himself togeth-

er, hunched over the controls. "OK, Jimper, I won't give up if you won't; but that's an almighty big rabbit you're going to have to pull out of that miniature hat!"

9

IT was not a good landing. Vallant unstrapped himself, got to his feet, holding onto the couch for support. Jimper crept out from under the folded blankets that had fallen on him, straightening his cap.

"We're a couple of miles short of the mark, Jimper," Vallant said. "I'm sorry; it was the best I could do."

"Now must we hasten, Vallant; deep among the blue peaks lies Galliale; long must we climb." Jimper opened his knapsack, took out a tiny miniature of a standard vacuum suit, began pulling it on. Vallant managed a laugh.

"You came prepared, fella. I guess your friend Jason made that for you."

"Even in this suit, Jimper will be cold," the long nose seemed redder than ever. He fitted the grape-fruit-sized bowl in place over his head. Vallant checked the panel. The screens were dead; the proximity indicator dial was smashed. He donned his suit hurriedly.

"They saw us crash; they'll pick

a flatter spot a few miles back; that gives us a small head start." He cycled the port open; loose objects fluttered as the air whooshed from the ship; frost formed instantly on horizontal surfaces.

Standing in the open lock, Vallant looked out at a wilderness of tilted ice-slabs, fantastic architectural shapes of frost, airy bridges, tunnels, chasms of blue ice.

"Jimper—are you sure—out there . . . ?"

"High among the ice peaks," Jimper's tiny voice squeaked in Vallant's helmet. "Jimper will lead you."

"Lead on, then." Vallant jumped down into the feathery drift-snow. "I'll try to follow."

The slopes were near-vertical now, polished surfaces that slanted upward, glinting darkly. The tiny arc-white sun glared between two heights that loomed overhead like cliffs. In the narrow valley between them, Vallant toiled upward, Jimper scampering ahead.

Far above a mighty river poured over a high cliff, thundering down into mist: its roar was a steady rumble underfoot.

Abruptly, Jimper's voice sounded in a shrill shout. "Vallant! Success! The Gateway lies ahead!"

Vallant struggled on another step, another, too exhausted to

answer. There was a sudden heavy tremor underfoot. Jimper sprang aside. Vallant looked up; far above, a vast fragment detached itself from the wall, seeming to float downward with dream-like grace, surrounded by a convoy of lesser rubble. Great chunks smashed against the cliff-sides, cascaded downward; the main mass of the avalanche shattered, dissolved into a cloud of ice-crystals. At the last moment, Jimper's warning shrilling in his ears, Vallant jumped for the shelter of a crevice. A torrent of snow poured down through the sluice-like narrow, quickly rising above the level of Vallant's hiding place. His helmet rang like a bell bombarded with gravel, then damped out as the snow packed around him. Profound silence closed in.

"Vallant!" Jimper's voice came. "Are you safe?"

"I don't know . . ." Vallant struggled, moved his arms an inch. "I'm buried; no telling how deep." He scraped at the packed snow, managed to twist himself over on his face. He worked carefully then, breaking pieces away from above, thrusting them behind. He was growing rapidly weaker; his arms seemed leaden. He rested, dug, rested . . .

THE harsh white star that was the sun still hung between the ice-cliffs when Vallant's groping

fingers broke through and he pulled himself out to lie gasping on the surface.

"Vallant—move not or you are surely lost!" Jimper piped in his ears.

He lay, sprawled, too tired even to lift his head.

"The Not-men," Jimper went on. "Oh, they are close, Vallant."

"How close?" Vallant groaned.

"Close . . . close."

"Have they seen me?"

"Not yet, I think—but if you stir—"

"I can't stay here . . ." With an effort, Vallant got to his hands and knees, then rose, tottered on, slipping and falling. Above, Jimper danced on a ledge, frantic with apprehension.

"It lies just ahead!" He shrilled. "The gateway to my Land of Galliale; only a little more, Vallant! A few scant paces . . ."

Ice chips flew from before Vallant's face. For a moment he stared, not understanding—

"They have seen you, Vallant!" Jimper screamed. "They shoot; oh, for a quiver of bolts . . .!"

Vallant turned. A hundred yards below, a party of four suited figures—men or Niss—tramped upward. One raised the gun as a warning.

"Vallant—it is not far! Hasten!"

"It's no use," Vallant gasped. "You go ahead, Jimper. And I

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27

hope you find home again, up there in the ice."

"Jimper will not desert you, Vallant! Come, rise and try again!"

Vallant made a choking sound that was half sob, half groan. He got to his feet, lurched forward; ice smashed, a foot away. The next shot knocked him floundering into a drift of soft snow. He found his feet, struggled upward. They were shooting to intimidate, not to kill, he told himself; they needed information—and there was no escape . . .

There was a ridge ahead; Vallant paused, gathering strength. He lunged, gained the top as a near-miss kicked a great furrow in the ice; then he was sliding down the reverse slope. A dark opening showed ahead—a patch of rock, ice-free, the mouth of a cave. He rose, ran toward it, fell, then crawled . . .

It was dark suddenly; Vallant's helmet had frosted over. He groped his way on, hearing the sharp ping! of expanding metal.

"This way!" Jimper's voice rang in his helmet. "We will yet win free, Vallant!"

"Can't go . . . farther . . ." Vallant gasped. He was down now, lying on his face. There was a minute tugging at his arm. Through the frost melting from his face-plate, he saw Jimper's tiny figure, pulling frantically at

his sleeve. He got to his knees, stood, tottered on. A powerful wind seemed to buffet at him. Wind—in this airless place . . .

Without warning, a gigantic bubble soundlessly burst; that was the sensation that Vallant felt. For a moment he stood, his senses reeling; then he shook his head, looked down over his helmet, saw packed earth walls, shored by spindly logs. Far ahead, light gleamed faintly—

A terrific blow knocked him flat. He rolled, found himself on his back, staring toward four dark figures, silhouetted against the luminous entrance through which he had come a minute before.

"I will bring rescuers!" Jimper's voice shrilled in Vallant's helmet.

"Run!" Vallant choked. "Don't let . . . them get you, too . . ."

Faintness overtook him . . .

"Do not despair, Vallant," Jimper's voice seemed faint, far away. "Jimper will return . . ."

They stood over him, three Niss, grotesque and narrow-faced in their helmets, and one human, a whiskery, small-eyed man. Their mouths worked in a conversation inaudible to Vallant. Then one Niss made a downward motion with his hand; the man stepped forward, reached—

Suddenly, a wooden peg stood against the grey-green fabric of his ship-suit, upright in the cen-

ter of his chest. A second magically appeared beside it—and a third. The man toppled, clutching . . . Behind him a Niss crouched, a flick of scarlet tongue visible against the gape of the white mouth—

A shaft stood abruptly in its throat. It fell backwards. Vallant raised his head; a troop of tiny red- and green-clad figures stood, setting bolts and loosing them. A Niss leaped, struck down two—then stumbled, fell, his thin chest bristling. The last Niss turned, ran from sight.

"Vallant!" Jimper's voice piped. "We are saved!"

Vallant opened his mouth to answer and darkness closed in.

10

VALLANT lay on his back, feeling the gentle breeze that moved against his skin, scenting the perfumed aroma of green, growing things. Somewhere, a bird trilled a melody. He opened his eyes, looked up at a deep blue sky in which small white clouds sailed, row on row, like fairy yachts bound for some unimaginable regatta. All around were small sounds like the peeping of new-hatched chicks. He turned his head, saw a gay pavilion of red and white striped silk supported by slim poles of polished black wood topped with silver lance-heads. Under it, around it,

all across the vivid green of the lawn-like meadow, thronged tiny man-like figures, gaudily dressed, the males with caps and cross-bows, or armed with footlong swords, their mates in gossamer and the sparkle of tiny gems.

At the center of the gathering, in a chair like a doll's, a corpulent elf lolled in the shadow of the pavilion. He jumped as he saw Vallant's eye upon him. He pointed, peeping excitedly in a strange, rapid tongue. A splendidly dressed warrior walked boldly toward Vallant, planted himself by his outflung hand, recited a speech.

"Sorry, Robin Goodfellow," Vallant said weakly. "I don't understand. Where's Jimper?"

The little creature before him looked about, shouted. A bedraggled fellow in muddy brown came up between two armed warriors.

"Alas, Vallant," he piped. "All is not well in my land of Galliale."

"Jimper—you look a bit on the unhappy side, considering you brought off your miracle right on schedule . . ."

"Something's awry, Vallant. There sits my king, Tweeple the Eater of One Hundred Tarts—and he knows not his Ambassador, Jimper!"

"Doesn't know you . . .?" Vallant repeated.

"Jason warned me it would be so," Jimper wailed. "Yet I scarce

believed him. None here knows faithful Jimper . . ."

"Are you sure you found the right town? Maybe since you left—"

"Does Jimper not know the place where he was born, where he lived while forty Great Suns came and went?" The mannikin took out a three-inch square of yellow cloth, mopped his forehead. "No, Vallant; this is my land—but it lies in the grip of strange enchantments. True, at my call the King sent warriors who guard the cave to kill the Not-men—the Evil Giants—but they would have killed you, too, Vallant, had I not plead your helpless state, and swore you came as a friend. We Spril-folk have ever feared the memory of the Evil Giants.

"Kill me?" Vallant started to laugh, then remembered the shafts bristling in the bodies of the Niss. "I've come too far to get myself killed now."

"Near you were to a longer journey still, Vallant. I know not how long the king will stay his hand."

"Where are we, Jimper? How did we get here?"

The king's men dragged you here on a mat of reeds."

"But—how did we get out of the cave . . .?"

"Through the Portal, Vallant—as I said, yet you would not believe!"

"I'm converted," Vallant said. "I'm here—wherever here is. But I seem to remember a job of world-saving I was supposed to do."

Jimper looked stricken. "Alas, Vallant! King Tweepie knows naught of these great matters! It was he whom Jason told of the Great Affairs beyond the Portal, and the part the Folk must play."

"So I'm out of a job?" Vallant lay for a moment, feeling the throb in his head, the ache that spread all through his shoulder and back.

"Maybe I'm dreaming," he said aloud. He made a move to sit up—

"No, Vallant! Move not, on your life!" Jimper shouted. "The King's archers stand with drawn bows if you should rise to threaten them!"

VALLANT turned his head; a phalanx of tiny bowmen stood, arrows aimed, a bristling wall of foot-tall killers. Far away, beyond the green meadow, the clustered walls and towers of a miniature city clung to a hillside.

"Didn't you tell the King that I came to help him?"

"I pledged my life on it, Vallant—but he names me stranger. At last he agreed that so long as you lay sorely hurt, no harm could come of you—but take

care! The King need but say the word, and you are lost, Vallant!"

"I can't lie here forever, Jimper. What if it rains?"

"They prepare a pavilion for you, Vallant—but first must we prove your friendship."

Jimper mopped his face again. Vallant stared up at the sky.

"How badly am I hurt?" Vallant moved slightly, testing his muscles. "I don't even remember being hit."

"A near-miss, meant to warn you, Vallant—but great stone chips are buried in your flesh. The King's surgeons could remove them—if he would so instruct them. Patience now, Vallant; I will treat with him again."

Vallant nodded, watched as Jimper, flanked by his guards, marched back to stand before the pudgy ruler. More piping talk ensued. Then Jimper returned, this time with two companions in crumpled conical hats.

"These are the royal surgeons, Vallant," he called. "They will remove the flints from your back. You have the royal leave to turn over—but take care; do not alarm him with sudden movements."

Vallant complied, groaning; he felt a touch, twisted his head to see a two-foot ladder lean against his side. A small face came into view at the top, apprehensive under a pointed hat. Val-

lant made what he hoped was an encouraging smile.

"Good morning, doctor," he said. "I guess you feel like a sailor getting ready to skin a whale . . ." then he fainted.

11

VALLANT sat on a rough log bench, staring across the four-foot stockade behind which he had been fenced for three weeks now—as closely as he could estimate time, in a land where the sun stood overhead while he slept, wakened, and slept again. Now it was behind the tops of the towering poplar-like trees, and long shadows lay across the lawns under a sky of green and violet and flame. A mile away, lights glittered from a thousand tiny windows in the toy city of Galliale.

"If I could but convince the King," Jimper piped dolefully, a woebegone expression on his pinched features. "But fearful is the heart of Tweeple; not like the warrior kings of old, who slew the Evil Giants."

"These Evil Giants—were they the Niss?"

"Well night it be, Vallant. The legends tell that they were ugly as trolls and evil beyond the imagining of man or Spril. Ah, but those were brave days, when the Great Giants had fallen, and only the Folk fought on."

"Jimper, do you suppose there's any truth in these legends of yours?"

The tiny mannikin stared. "Truth? True they be as carven stone, Vallant! True as the bolt sped from my bow! Look there!" He pointed to a gaunt stone structure rising from a twilight hill beyond the forest to the east.

"Is that a dream? But look at the stones of it! Plain it is that Giants raised it once, long and long ago."

"What is it?"

"The Tower of the Forgotten; the legend tells that in it lies a treasure so precious that for it a King would give his crown; but the Thing of Fear, the Scaled One, the Dread Haik set to guard it by the Evil Giants, wards it well, pent in the walls."

"Oh, a dragon, too. I must say you have a completely equipped mythology, Jimper. What about these Great Giants—I take it they were friendly with the Spril?"

"Great were the Illimpi, Vallant, and proud were the Spril to serve them. But now they are dead, vanished all away; and yet, some say they live on, in their distant place, closed away from their faithful Folk by spells of magic, and the Scaled Haik of the Niss."

"Jimper—you don't believe in magic?"

"Do I not? Have I not seen the

Cave of No Return with my own eyes—and worse, passed through it?"

"That's the tunnel we came in by, Jimper. You went through it with your friend Jason on the way out—and now you've returned."

"Ah, have I indeed, Vallant? True it is I passed through the Cave—and only my sworn fealty to my King forced me to it—but have I returned in truth? Who is there who welcomes my return?"

"I admit that's a puzzler . . ."

"Tales have I heard of others, long ago, who came from the cave, strangers to the Tribe of Spril—and yet of our blood and customs. Always they talked of events unknown, and swore they had but ventured out into the Blue Ice—and now I am of their number; the stranger in his own land, whom no one knows."

VALLANT rose, looking across toward the city. A long procession of torch-bearers was filing from the city gates, winding across the dark plain toward Vallant's stockade. "It looks as though we have visitors coming, Jimper."

"Woe, Vallant! This means the King has decided your fate! Well has he wine this night—and drink was never known to temper the mercy of the King!"

"If they're coming here to fill me full of arrows, I'm leaving!"

"Wait, Vallant! The captain of the guard is a decent fellow; I'll go to meet them. If they mean you ill, I'll . . . I'll snatch a torch and wave it thus . . ." He made circular motions above his head.

Vallant nodded. "OK, partner—but don't get yourself in trouble."

Half an hour later, the cavalcade halted before Vallant, Jimper striding beside the breast-plated Captain. He ran forward.

"Mixed news, Vallant; This is the judgement of the King: that you shall stand before him in his Hall, and show proof that you are friend to the Spril-folk; and if you fail . . ."

"If I fail?" Vallant prompted.

"Then shall you enter the Cave of No Return, whence no man or Spril has ever come back."

The main avenue of the city of Galliale was ten feet wide, cobbled with cut stones no bigger than dice, winding steeply up between close-crowded houses, some half-timbered, others of gaily patterned masonry, with tiny shops below, gay with lights and merchandise, and open casement windows above, from which small, sharp-nosed faces thrust, staring at the looming giant who strode along, surrounded by the helmeted warriors of the King, toward the dazzling tower of light that was the Royal Palace of

Tweeple the Eater of One Hundred Tarts.

"I don't understand why his highness isn't content to let me sit out there under my canopy and smell the flowers," Vallant said to Jimper, who rode on his shoulder. "I've even volunteered to be his royal bodyguard—"

"He sees you grow well and strong, Vallant. He fears you may yet turn on the Folk as did the Evil Giants in the olden time."

"Can't you convince him I'm the good variety? I'd be handy to have around if that Niss who escaped came back, with a couple of his friends."

"Never will he return, Vallant!" All who enter the Cave—"

"I know—but if he sends *me* out there in the cold, I'm likely to turn around and sneak right back in—tradition or no."

"Ah, if Jason were but here to vouch for you," Jimper piped. "Well he knew the tongue of the Spril, and wondrous the tales he told; charmed was King Tweeple, and many were the honors of Jason the Giant. But now, alas, the King knows naught of all these things."

"How did Jason happen to find Galliale?"

"He told of a great battle fought between the worlds, where Niss died like moths in the flame under the mighty weapons of the men of Earth—"

"The old man talked to me about a war; he said we lost."

"Jason's ship was hurt," Jimper went on. "He fell far, far, but at last brought the ship to ground among the Blue Ice crags. He saw the Portal among the snows—the same in which we fought the Not-men, Vallant—and so he came to Fair Galliale."

"And then he left again—"

"But not until he had tarried long and long among us, Vallant. At his wish, sentinels were posted, day and night, to watch through the Cave of No Return, which gives a fair view of the icy slopes and the plain beyond, for sight of men. Often, when he had drunk a hogshead or two of the King's best ale, he would groan, and cry aloud to know how it went with the battle of the Giants; but he knew the magic of the Cave, and so he waited. And then one day, when he had grown old and bent, the sentries gave him tidings, that a strange vessel lay in view beyond the Cave. Grieved was the King, and he swore that he would set his bowmen to guard the entrance to that enchanted path, that Jason the Teller of Tales might not walk down it to be seen no more; but Jason only smiled and said that go he would, asking only that an Ambassador be sent with him, to treat with the Giants; and it was I, Jimper, warrior and scholar, whom the King chose."

THAT was quite an honor; too bad he doesn't remember it; and I'm sorry I don't know any stories I could charm the old boy with. I haven't made much headway with the language yet."

"Long before Jason there was another Giant who came to Galliale," Jimper chirped. "No talker was he, but a mighty Giant of valor. The tale tells how he went in against the Scaled One, to prove his love to the King of those times. I heard the tale from my grandfather's father, when I was but a fingerling, when we sat in a ring under the moons and talked of olden times. He came from the Cave—hurt, as you were Vallant. And the King of those times would have slain him—but in sign of friendship, he entered the Tower of the Forgotten, there to battle the Fanged One who guards the treasures. Then did the king know that he was friend indeed, and of the race of goodly Giants—"

"And what happened to him in the end?"

"Alas, never did he return from the Tower, Vallant—but honored was his memory!"

"That's a cheery anecdote. Well, we'll find out in a minute what Tweeple has in mind."

The procession had halted in the twenty-foot Grand Plaza before the palace gates. The warriors formed up in two ranks, flanking Vallant, bows ready. Be-

yond a foot-high spike-topped wall, past a courtyard of polished stones as big as dominoes, the great two-foot high entrance to the palace blazed with light. Beyond it, Vallant caught a glimpse of intricately carved panelling, tiny-patterned tapestries, and a group of Spril courtiers in splendid costumes, bowing and curtsying as the plump elf-king waddled forth to stand, hands on hips, staring up at Vallant.

He spoke in a shrill voice, waving ringed hands, pausing now and again to quaff a thimble-sized goblet offered by a tiny Spril no taller than a chipmunk.

He finished, and a servant handed him a scarlet towel to dry his pink face. Jimper, who had climbed down and taken up a position in the row of Spril beside the King, came across to Vallant.

"The King says . . ." He paused, swallowed. "That his royal will is . . ."

"Go ahead," Vallant urged, eyeing the ranks of ready bowmen. "Tell me the worst."

"To prove your friendship, Vallant—you must enter the Tower of the Forgotten, and there slay the Fanged One, the Scaled One, the Eater of Fire!"

Vallant let out a long sigh. "You had me worried there for a minute, Jimper," he said, almost gaily. "I thought I was going to provide a target for the royal artillery—"

"Jest not, Vallant!" Jimper stamped angrily. "Worse by far is the fate decreed by the King! Minded am I to tell him so—"

"Don't get yourself in hot water, Jimper: it's OK. I'm satisfied with the assignment."

"But, Vallant! No one—not even a Great Giant—can stand against the Fearsome One whom the Evil Giants set to guard the tower!"

"Will he be satisfied if I go into the Tower and come out again alive—even if I don't find the dragon?"

"Delude yourself no more, Vallant! The Scaled One waits there—"

"Still—"

"Yes, to enter the Tower is enough. But—"

"Fair enough. I may not come out dragging the body by the tail, but the legend won't survive the experience. When do I go?"

"As soon as may be . . ." Jimper shuddered, then drew himself erect. "But have no fear, Vallant; Jimper will be at your side."

Vallant smiled down at the tiny warrior. "That's a mighty brave thing to do, Jimper; I wish I could put your mind at rest about the dragon."

Jimper looked up at him, hands on hips. "And I, Vallant, wish that I could stir in you some healthful fear." He turned, strode back across the courtyard

to the King, saluted, spoke briefly. A murmur ran out from the group of courtiers; then a treble cheer went up, while tiny caps whirled high. The King signalled, and white-clad servitors surged forward, setting up tables, laying out heaped platters, rolling great one-quart barrels into position.

"The King decrees a night of feasting, Vallant!" Jimper chirped, running to him. "And you too shall dine!"

Vallant watched while a platform normally used for speeches was set up and vivid rugs as fine as silk laid out on it; then he seated himself and accepted a barrel of ale, raised it in a toast to the King.

"Eat, drink, and be merry . . ." he called.

"If you can," Jimper said, mournful again, "knowing what tomorrow will bring."

12

IN the fresh light of morning, Vallant strode across the emerald velveteen of the Plain of Galliale, feeling the cool air in his face, ignoring the throb in his head occasioned by last night's five barrels of royal ale, watching the silhouette of the tower ahead growing larger against the dawn sky. A long sword—a man-sized duplicate of the tiny one at Jimper's belt—brought from the King's treasury

of Ancient Things for his use, swung at his side; in his hand he carried a nine-foot spear with a head of polished brass. Behind him trotted a full battalion of the Royal Guard, lances at the ready.

"I'll have to admit that King Tweeple went all-out in support of the expedition, Jimper," Vallant said. "Even if he did claim he'd never heard of your friendly giant."

"Strange are the days when valued tales of old are unknown to the king. But no matter—pleased is he to find a champion."

"Well, I hope he's just as pleased when I come out and report that the Scaled One wasn't there after all."

Jimper looked up from where he scampered at Vallant's side. He was splendid now in a new scarlet cloak and a pink cap with a black plume. "Vallant, the Scaled One dwells in the Tower, as sure as blossoms bloom and kings die!"

Another quarter hour's walk brought Vallant and his escort through the forest of great conifers and out onto a wild-grown slope where long mounds overgrown with vines and brambles surrounded the monolithic tower at its crest. Near at hand a slab of white stone gleamed through underbrush. Vallant went close, pulled the growth away to reveal a weathered bench-top.

"Hey, it looks as though someone used to live here—and a giant at that." He glanced at the tumuli, some large, some small, forming an intersecting geometric pattern that reached up to the tower's base.

"Those are the ruins of buildings, and walls; this whole hill-top was built up at one time—a long time ago."

"Once those Giants whom the Spril served dwelt here," Jimper piped. "Then the Evil Giants came and slew our masters with weapons of fire; there was a great king among the Spril in those days, Vallant: Josro the Sealer of Gates. He it was who led the Folk in the war against the Ugly Ones." He looked up at the Tower. "But, alas, the Scaled One lives on to wall away the treasure of the Illimpi."

"Well, let's see if we can go finish the job, Jimper. Vallant went up past the mounded ruins. At the top he paused, looking back down the silent slope. "It must have been beautiful once, Jimper," he said. "A palace of white marble, and the view all across the valley . . ."

"Fair it was, and enchanted is its memory," Jimper said. "Long have we feared this place, but now we come to face its dreads. Lead on, Vallant; Jimper is at your side!"

A shrill trumpet note pierced the air. The troop of King's Lan-

cers had halted. Their captain called an order; the two-foot lances swung down in a salute.

"They wait here," Jimper said. "The King will not risk them closer—and they guard our retreat, if the Scaled One should break out, which Fate forbend!"

Vallant returned the salute with a wave of his hand. "I guess if you believe in dragons, to come this far is pretty daring." He glanced down at Jimper. "That makes you a regular hero, partner."

"And what of you, Vallant! In your vast shadow Jimper walks boldly, but you go with only your lance and blade to meet the Terrible One!"

"That doesn't count; I don't really expect to meet him."

NOW four warriors came forward, stumbling under the weight of a foot-long box slung from their shoulders by leather straps. They lowered it gingerly before Vallant, scampered back to the ranks.

"What's this, a medal—already?" Vallant pressed a stud on the side of the flat box; its lid popped up. Nestled in a fitted case lay a heavy electro-key of unfamiliar design. Vallant picked it up, whistled in surprise.

"Where did this come from, Jimper?"

"When long ago the Sprill-folk slew the Evil Ones, this did they

find among the spoils. Long have we guarded it, until our Goodly Giants should come again."

Vallant examined the heavy key. "This is a beautiful job of microtronic engineering, Jimper. I'm beginning to wonder who these Giants of yours were." He went up the last few yards of the vine-grown slope to the vast door of smooth, dark material which loomed up in the side of the tower; the structure itself, Vallant saw, was not of stone, but of a weathered synthetic, porous and discolored with age.

"I'd give a lot to know who built this, Jimper," he said. "It must have been a highly technical people; that stuff looks like it's been there for a lot of years."

"Great were our Giants, and great was their fall. Long have we waited their return. Now it may be that you, Vallant, and Jason, are the first of those ancient ones to come back to your Galliale."

"Fraid not, Jimper. But we can still be friends." Vallant studied the edge of the door.

"Looks like we'll have to dig, Jimper. The dirt's packed in here, no telling how deep." Jimper unsheathed his eight-inch sword, handed it to Vallant. "Use this; a nobler task could not be found for it."

Vallant set to work. Behind him, the ranks of the bowmen stood firm, watching. The un-

yielding surface of the door extended down six inches, a foot, two feet, before he came to its lower edge.

"We've got a job ahead, partner," he said. "I hope this snoozing dragon of yours is worth all the effort."

"For my part," Jimper said, "I hope the sound of our digging awakens him not too soon."

TWO hours later, with the door cleared of the packed soil and an arc excavated to accommodate its swing, Vallant returned Jimper's sword, then took the key from the box.

"Let's hope it still works; I'd hate to try to batter my way past that . . ." He lifted the key to the slot in the door; there was a deep-seated click!, a rumble of old gears.

"It looks as though we're in business."

Vallant hammered back the heavy locking bar that secured the massive door; then, levering with his swordblade, he swung the thick panel back, looked into a wide corridor inches deep in dust. The Captain of the Guard and four archers came up, waiting nervously to close the door as soon as Vallant was safely inside. Jimper sneezed. Vallant stooped, lifted him to his shoulder. He waved to the escort, who raised a nervous cheer, then stepped into the dust of the cor-

ridor, watched as the door slowly clanked shut behind him.

"We're in, Jimper," he said. "Now—which way to the dragon?"

Jimper fingered his cross-bow, staring ahead along the dim hall. "H-he could be anywhere . . ."

"Let's take a look around." Vallant explored the length of the corridor which circled the tower against the outer wall, floundering through dust drifted deep under the loopholes high in the walls. At one point a great heap almost blocked the passage. He kicked at it, yelped; rusted metal plates showed where the covering of dust was disturbed.

"It looks like a dump for old armor," he complained, clambering over the six-foot obstruction. "Maybe this was an early junkyard . . ." Jimper muttered fretfully. "Walk softly, Vallant . . ."

They completed the circuit, then took a stairway, mounted to a similar passage at a higher level. Everywhere the mantle of dust lay undisturbed. They found rooms, empty except for small metal objects of unfamiliar shape, half buried in dust. Once Vallant stooped, picked up a statuette of bright yellow metal.

"Look at this, Jimper," he said. "It's a human figure . . .!"

"True," Jimper agreed, squinting at the three-inch image. "No Spril form is that."

"This place must have been built by men, Jimper! Or by something so like them that the differences don't show. And yet, we've only had space travel for a couple of centuries—"

"Long have the Giants roamed the worlds, Vallant."

"Maybe—but humans have been Earth-bound until just lately. It's comforting to know that there are other creatures somewhere that look something like us—I guess."

THEY followed corridors, mounted stairs, prowled through chambers large and small. Faint light from tiny apertures in the walls was the only illumination. High in the tower, they came to a final narrow flight of steps. Vallant looked up.

"Well, if he's not up here, I think we can consider the mission accomplished."

"Certain it is that somewhere lurks the Dread One," Jimper chirped. "Now l-let him b-be-ware!"

"That's the spirit." Vallant went up the stairs—gripping his sword now in spite of his scepticism; if there were anything alive in the tower, it would have to be here . . .

He emerged in a wide, circular room, high-vaulted, thick with dust. A lustrous cube, white, frosty-surfaced, twelve feet on a side, was mounted two feet clear

of the floor at the exact center of the chamber. It seemed almost to glow in the dim room. Cautiously, Vallant circled it. The four sides were identical, unadorned, shimmering white.

Vallant let his breath out, sheathed the sword. "That's that," he said. "No dragon."

Perched on his shoulder, Jimper clutched his neck.

"I fear this place, Vallant," he piped. "We have blundered—I know not how . . ."

"We're all right, old timer," Vallant soothed. "Let's take a look around. Maybe we can pick up a souvenir to take back to old Tweeples—"

"Vallant, speak not with disrespect of my King!" Jimper commanded.

"Sorry." Vallant's boots went in to the ankle as he crossed the drifted floor to the glistening polyhedron; he touched its surface; it was cool, slippery as graphite.

"Funny stuff," he said. "I wonder what it's for?"

"Vallant, let us not linger here."

Vallant turned, looked around the gloomy room. Vague shapes bulked under the dust blanket. He went to a tablelike structure, blew at it, raising a cloud that made Jimper sneeze. He brushed at the array of dials and bright-colored knobs and buttons that emerged from the silt.

"It's some kind of control console, Jimper! What do you suppose it controls?"

"L-let us depart, Vallant!" Jimper squeaked. "I like not these ancient rooms!"

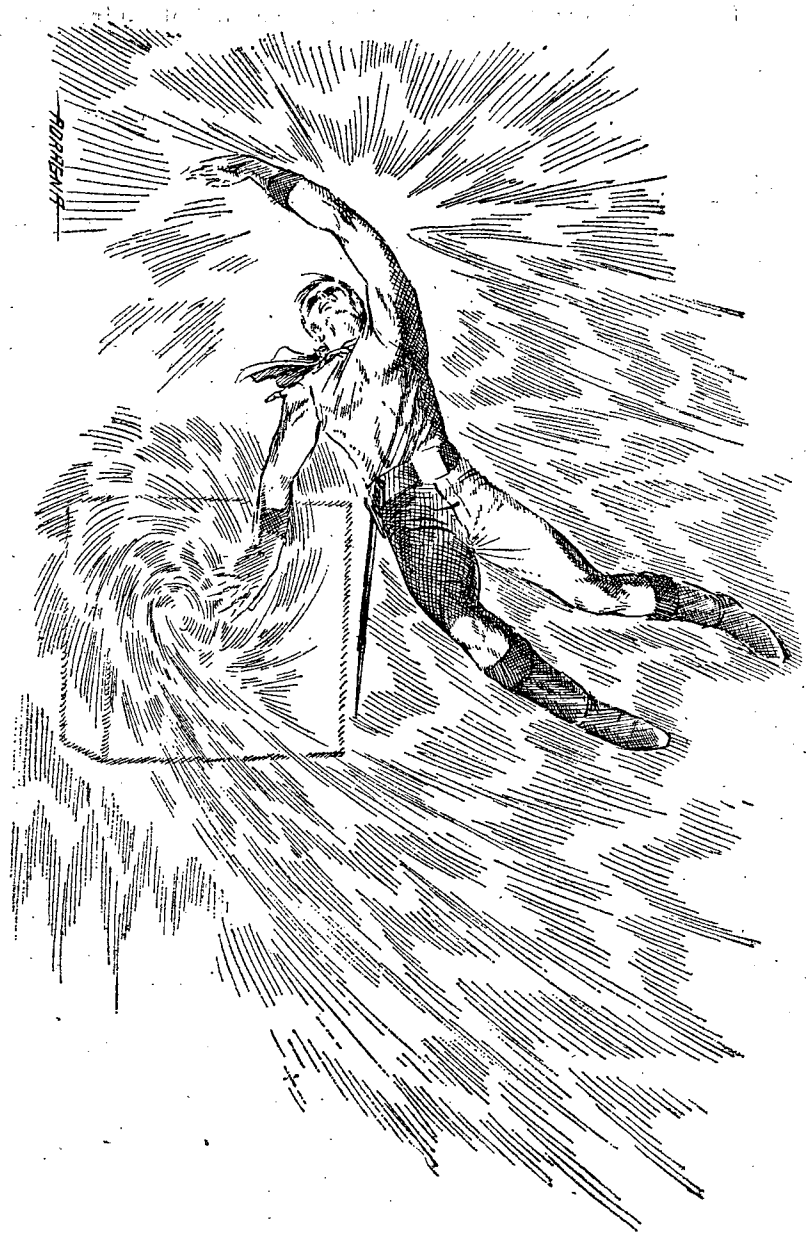
"I'll bet it has something to do with that . . ." Vallant nodded toward the cube. "Maybe if I push a couple of buttons—" He jabbed a finger at a large scarlet lever in the center of the panel. It clicked down decisively.

"Vallant—meddle not with these mysteries!" Jimper screeched. He crouched on Vallant's shoulder, eyes fixed on the lever.

"Nothing happened," Vallant said. "I guess it was too much to expect . . ." He paused. A draft stirred in the room; dust shifted, moving on the table-top.

"Hey—" Vallant started.

Jimper huddled against his neck, moaning. Dust was flowing across the floor, drifting toward the glossy surface of the cube, whipping against it—and beyond. Vallant felt the draft increase, fluttering the fabric of his shipsuit. The dust was rising up in a blinding cloud now; Vallant ducked his head, started toward the door. The wind rose to whirlwind proportions, hurling him against the wall; air was whining in through the loopholes; dust whipped and streamed, flowing to the face of the cube, which glared through the obscuring veil now



with a cold white light. Vallant lunged again for the door, met a blast like a sand-storm that sent him reeling, Jimper still clinging to his perch. He struggled to a sheltered angle between floor and wall, watched as the wind whirled the dust away, scouring the floor clean, exposing a litter of metallic objects. Nearby lay a finger-ring, an ornate badge, an odd-shaped object that might have been a hand-gun. Beyond were a scatter of polished metal bits, the size and shape of shark teeth.

Now, suddenly, the wind was lessening. The white-glaring rectangle was like an open window with a view of a noon-day fog. The last swirls of dust flashed toward it and were gone. The shrilling of the gale died. The room was still again.

"Now must we flee . . ." Jimper whistled; he flapped his cloak, settled his pink cap, edging toward the door. Vallant got to his feet, spitting dust. "Not yet, Jimper. Let's take a look at this . . ." He went close to the glowing square, stared at it, reached out a hand—

And encountered nothing.

He jerked the hand back quickly.

"Whew! That's cold!" He massaged the numbed hand. "Half a second, and it was stiff!"

Somewhere, far away, a faint, metallic clanking sounded.

"Vallant! He comes!" Jimper screeched.

"Calm down, Jimper! We're all right. It was a little thick there for a minute, but I suppose that was just some sort of equalization process. Or maybe this thing is a central cleaning device; sort of a building-sized vacuum cleaner—"

ABRUPTLY, the panel before Vallant dimmed. Shapes whipped across it. The shadowy outlines of a room appeared, sharpened into vivid focus. Sounds came through: an electronic hum, the insistent ping-pong of a bell, then a clump of hurried feet.

A man appeared, stood staring across at Vallant, as through an open doorway.

Or almost a man.

He was tall—near seven feet, and broad through the shoulders. His hair curled close to his head, glossy black as Persian lamb, and through it, the points of two short, blunt horns protruded, not quite symmetrically, on either side of the nobly rounded skull.

He spoke—staccato words in a language strange to Vallant. His voice was deep, resonant.

"Sorry, sir," Vallant got out, staring. "I'm afraid I don't understand . . ."

The horned man leaned closer. His large dark-blue eyes were fixed on Vallant's.

"*Lla*," he said commandingly.

Vallant shook his head. He tried a smile; the majestic figure before him was not one which inspired the lighter emotions. "I guess—" he started, then paused to clear his throat. "I guess we've stumbled onto something a little bigger than I expected . . ."

The horned man made an impatient gesture as Vallant paused. He repeated the word he had spoken. Vallant felt a tug at the knee of his suit.

"Vallant!" Jimper peeped. Vallant looked down. "Not now, Jimper—"

"I think—I think Jimper understands what the Great Giant means. In the ceremony of the crowning of the king, there is the phrase, "*qa ic' lla* . . ." It is spoken in the old tongue, the speech of long ago; and the wise elders say those words mean 'when he speaks! He would have you talk . . .'"

The horned giant leaned toward Vallant, as though to see below the edge of the invisible plane between them. Vallant stooped, raised Jimper up chest-high. The mannikin straightened himself; then, standing on Vallant's hand, he doffed his feathered cap, bent nearly double in a deep bow.

"*Ta p'ic ih sya, Illimpi*," he chirped.

A remarkable change came over the horned man's face. His eyes widened; his mouth opened

—then a vast smile lit his face like a floodlight.

"*I' Ipliti!*" he roared. He turned, did something out of sight of Vallant beyond the edge of the cube, whirled back. He spoke rapidly to Jimper. The little creature spread his hands, looking contrite.

"*N'iqi*," he said. "*N'iqi, Illimi.*"

The giant nodded quickly, looked keenly at Vallant.

"*Lla, Vallant*," he commanded.

He knows my name . . ." Vallant gulped. "What am I supposed to talk about?"

"He is a Great Giant," Jimper peeped excitedly. "Well he knows Jimper's kind, from of old. Tell him all, Vallant—all that has befallen the race of Giants since last the Portal closed."

13

VALLANT talked for five minutes, while the giant beyond the invisible barrier adjusted controls out of sight below the Portal's edge.

" . . . when I came to, I was here—"

The giant nodded suddenly. "Well enough," he said clearly. Vallant stared in surprise. The horned man's lips, he noticed, did not move in synchronization with his words.

"Now," the giant said, "what world are you?"

"What . . . how . . . ?" Vallant started.

"A translating device; I am Cessus the Communicator. What world are you?"

"Well, I would have said I was on Pluto, except that . . . I couldn't be. And on the other hand, I must be . . ."

"Your language . . . A strange tongue it is; none that I have known in my days in the Nex. Best I find you on the Locator . . ." He flipped unseen levers; his eyes widened.

"Can it be?" He stared at Vallant. "A light glows on my panel that has not been lit these ten Grand Eons . . . that of Lost Galliale . . ."

Vallant nodded eagerly. "That's right—Galliale is what Jimper calls the place. But—"

"And your people; are all—as you?"

"More or less."

"None have these?" he pointed.

"Horns? No. And this isn't my home world, of course. I come from Terra—third from the sun."

"But—what of the Illimpi of Galliale?" The giant's face was taut with strain.

"Nobody lives here but Jimper's people. Right, Jimper?"

"True," Jimper spoke up.

"Once the Evil Giants—foes of the Great Giants—came; but from thicket and burrow we crept, after the last Great Giant

fell. We loosed our bolts to find their marks in vile green hide, then slipped away to fight again. So we dealt with them all, we bowmen, for against our secret bolts, of what avail their clumsy lightnings? The last of them fled away down the Cave of No Return, and free at last was My Land of Galliale from their loathsome kind. Now long have we waited for our Giants to come back; and in their absence have we tilled and spun and kept fair the land."

"Well done, small warrior," Cessus said. He studied Vallant's face. "You are akin to us—that much is plain to see; and you dwell on the double world that lies third from the sun—so some few survivors made good their secret flight there—"

"Survivors of what?"

"Of the onslaught of those you call the Niss."

"Then—what the old man said was true? They're invaders—"

"That, and more, Vallant! They are the bringers of darkness, the all-evil, the wasters of worlds!"

"But—they haven't wasted the Earth; you hardly notice them; they're just a sort of police force—"

"They are a poison that stains the Galaxy. Long ago, they came, destroying—but listen; this was the way of it:

"Ages past, we Illimpi built the Portal—this block of emptiness

before which you stand—linking the star-clouds. We sent colonists into the fair new world of Galliale—adventurers, man and woman, the brave ones who never could return; and with them went the Spril-folk, the faithful Little People.

"They thrived, and in time they built a Gate—a useful link to a sunny world they called Olan-tea, circling in the fifth orbit of a yellow sun twenty light-years distant. There they built cities, planted gardens that were a delight to the senses.

"Then, without warning, the Niss came to Galliale, pouring through the Gateway, armed with weapons of fire. Swift and terrible was their assault, and deadly the gases they spread abroad, and the crawling vermin to spread their plagues. The peaceful Illimpi of Galliale battled well, and volunteers rushed through the Great Portal to their aid. But deadly were the weapons of the Niss; they carried the Tower of the Portal and some few, mad with blood-lust, rushed through it, never to return. Then the Portal failed, and lost was our link with our colony. The long centuries have passed, and never did we know till now how it fared with Lost Galliale."

"So the Spril finished off the Niss, after the Niss had killed the Illimpi? Nice work, Jimper. But how did you manage it?"

"Proof were we against their sickness," Jimper piped. "But no defense had they against our bows."

"If the Niss are such killers, why haven't they used their weapons on us? The story the Syndarch tells is that they're our great friends, sharing their wisdom—"

"Proof have we seen of that lie," Jimper chirped. "Deep are the plots of the Niss."

"It is the Portal they seek," Cessus said. "All who came to Galliale were lost to them."

"Just a minute," Vallant cut in. "I'm lost. The Niss came through the Gateway from Olan-tea—but that was held by the Illimpi. The Niss must have hit them, and captured the Gateway—which I take it is some sort of matter transmitter. But why wasn't Galliale warned? And why is it none of the Galliales escaped through the Portal here, back to the home world? And how did the Gateway get shifted from Olan-tea to Pluto—"

CESSUS was growning in puzzlement. "Do you not know, Vallant—"

"Vallant!" Jimper cocked his head. "The Scaled One—I hear him stir!"

"It's your imagination, Jimper. We've explored the whole building, and didn't find him, remember?"

The horned man was looking at Jimper. "What manner of creature is this Scaled One?"

"It's just a superstition of Jimper's—" Vallant started.

"A Haik, Great Giant," Jimper shrilled. "A guardian set by the Niss when they had closed the Portal against the Illimpi, before they fared forth against the Spril, from which adventure no Niss returned—"

Cessus whirled on Vallant. "How have you restrained the beast?"

Vallant's mouth opened. "I hope you don't mean—" he began—

There was a sudden clangor as of armor clashing against stone.

"The Fanged One comes!" Jimper shrilled.

"What weapon have you!" Cessus rapped out.

"Just this ham-slicer . . ."

Vallant gripped the sword-hilt. "But I have a feeling it's not quite what the program requires . . ."

The clatter was louder now; Jimper screeched; the horned Giant whirled to reach behind the screen's edge—

There was a screech of tortured steel from the doorway; a hiss like an ancient steam-whistle split the air. Vallant spun, stared at a vast *thing*—like a jumble of rusted fragments of armor plate, wedged in the doorway, scrabbing with legs like

gleaming black cables three inches thick, armed with mirror-bright talons which raked grooves in the hard floor as though it were clay. From a head like a fang-spiked mace, white eyes with pinpoint pupils glared in insane ferocity. The haik surged, sending chips of the door-frame flying as it forced its bulk through the narrow way.

"Ye Gods!" Vallant yelled. "Jimper, why didn't you tell me this thing really existed!"

"Tell you I did, Vallant; now slay it with your sword!"

"What good is a hat-pin against a man-eating rhino like that!" Vallant backed, watching as the material of the wall chipped and crumbled under the force of the haik's thrust. His eye fell on the gun-like object on the floor. He jumped for it, caught it up, raised it and pressed the button on its side. A lance of blue flame licked out, touched the haik's snout. The monster clashed its jaws, gained another foot. The flame played on its cheek, dimmed abruptly, fell back to a weak yellowish glow, died with a harsh buzz. Vallant threw the weapon from him.

"Vallant!" Jimper shrieked. "The door-frame! It crumbles . . .!"

"Sorry, Jimper! I guess we'll just have to round up a posse and come back after him . . .!" Vallant grabbed up the little

creature, stepped to the screen—

"No, Vallant!" the horned man shouted—

"Here I come, ready or not—"

Vallant closed his eyes, and stepped through the Portal.

14

THERE was an instant of bitter cold; then silence, a touch of cool air, an odor of almonds . . .

Vallant opened his eyes. A great, dim, vaulted hall arched high above him; far away, mighty columns loomed into shadows. Beyond, an iodine-colored wall towered up, misty with distance, decorated in patterns of black lines set off with glittering flecks of gold and copper.

"Where is he?" Vallant blurted, staring around. "What happened to Cessus the Communicator?"

Jimper huddled against Vallant, peering up into the mists far overhead. "Lost are we now, Vallant. Nevermore will we see the spires of Galliale—nor the drab cities of your world . . ."

"He was right here—and the room behind him . . ."

"Dread are the mysteries of the Great Giants . . ." Jimper keened.

"Well," Vallant laughed shakily. "At least we left the haik behind." He sheathed the unused sword. "I wonder who lives here." Faint echoes rolled back

from the distant wall. "We're in a building of some kind; look at this floor, Jimper. Slabs the size of tennis courts. Talk about Giants . . ."

"Vallant—can we not go back? I dread the haik less than I fear this place of echoes."

"Well . . ." Vallant studied the empty air around them. "I don't see anything that looks like a Portal. Maybe if we just feel our way . . ." He took a cautious step, Jimper wriggled down, darted ahead. He paused, puzzled, turned back—and froze, staring. Vallant whirled. At the spot where he had stood, a glossy black cable, dagger tipped, writhed in the air, three feet above the stone floor.

"The haik!" Jimper squealed. With a deafening screech, the many-spiked head of the monster appeared, followed an instant later by its two-ton bulk, crashing thunderously through the Portal. For a moment it crouched as though confused; then at a sound from Jimper, it wheeled with murderous speed on its intended victims.

Vallant whipped out the sword. "Run, Jimper. Maybe I can slow him down for a second or two—"

Jimper snatched the crossbow from his back, fitted a six-inch quarrel in place, drew and let fly; the dart whistled past Vallant's head, glanced off the haik's armor. The creature gaped tooth-



ringed jaws, dug in its talons for the spring—

There was a sudden rush of air, a shriek of wind. From nowhere, a vast grid slammed down, struck with an impact that jarred the floor, knocked Vallant from his feet. He scrambled up, saw the grid receding as rapidly as it had come. The broken thing that had been the haik flicked cable-legs in a last convulsion, then lay, a shattered, rusted hulk, leaking thin fluid against the stone.

"Whatever that was," Vallant said shakily, "it just missed us . . ." He looked up. Far up in the dimness, a great pale shape hung, a misty oblong, with smaller dark patches, whose outline wavered and flowed, bulging and elongating—

Then it withdrew and was gone.

"Jimper . . . !" Vallant croaked. "Did you see that . . . ?"

"I saw naught, Vallant," Jimper shrilled. "The haik charged and then—I know not."

"It was . . ." Vallant paused to gulp. "A face . . . a huge, rubbery face, a mile long and five miles up . . . and I'd swear it was looking right at me . . . !"

"Another invasion of mind-fleas in the Hall," said a voice as clear as engraved print.

"Ill-struck, Brometa," a second voice answered. "I hear their twittering still."

"Vallant!" Jimper gasped. "Those there are who speak close by—and in the tongue of the Spril-folk—yet I see them not . . ."

"N-nonsense," Vallant gulped. "They're speaking English . . . But where are they?"

"We should have plugged the hole they burrowed last time," the silent voice said, "Here, give me the whisk; I'll attend to these fleas—"

"No!" Vallant yelled at the top of his lungs, staring upward into the formless shadows. "We're not fleas . . . !"

"Yapud! Did you hear words amid the twitterings just now?"

There was a pause; distant rumblings sounded. "You must have imagined it, Brometa—"

"I heard it just as you raised the whisk—"

"Don't do it!" Vallant bel-
lowed.

"There! Surely you heard that! It rang in my mind like a light-storm."

"Yes, I do believe you're right!"

Staring upward, Vallant saw the vast cloud-face appear again, its shape changing.

"I see nothing, Yapud."

"We're friendly!" Vallant shouted. "Don't swat us!"

"These fleas have the same irritating way of projecting thought forms out of all proportion to their size—"

"More of those hate-scorched vermin who infested the Hall last Great Cycle? Swat them at once!"

"No, this is another breed. Those others—Niss, they called themselves—what a vicious mind-stink they raised before we fumigated! Hmmm. This one seems quite different, Yapud."

"Vermin are vermin! Give me the whisk—"

"Hold! Little enough I have to divert me here; let me converse awhile with these noisy fleas."

"What transpires, Vallant?" Jimper peeped. He gazed worriedly up at Vallant. "Who speaks in Jimper's head?"

"I don't know, Jimper—but it's something that thinks I'm a flea, and doesn't even know about you."

"Here, you fleas; I'll put a paper on the floor; step upon it, that I may lift you up where I can lay eyes on you."

THERE was a great rushing of air. A vast, white shape rushed down, blotting out the mists above. Vallant and Jimper dropped flat, clung to crevices in the floor against the rush of air that whistled past. An immense, foot-thick platform thudded to the floor fifty feet away, stretching off into the distance. The wind howled and died.

"We're supposed to climb up on that, Jimper," Vallant said.

"So they can get a look at us."

"Must we?"

"I guess we'd better—if we don't want to get whisked, like the haik."

Vallant and Jimper got to their feet, walked across to the ragged-edged, spongy mat, clambered up on it. At close range, the fibres that comprised it were clearly visible; it was like a coarse felt of pale straw.

"OK," Vallant hailed. "Lift away . . ."

They lost their balance as the platform surged up beneath them: a white light appeared, grew. Their direction of motion changed; the paper tilted sickeningly; then, with an abrupt lurch, came to rest. The glare above, like a giant sun, cast blue shadows across the white plain behind them. A mile away, two unmistakable faces loomed, block-long eyes scanning the area, their changing shapes even more alarming at close range.

"There it is!" A shape like a vast blimp floated into view, pointing.

"Yes—and isn't that another one beside it—a hatchling, perhaps?"

"Ah, poor things; a mother and young. Always have I had a soft spot for maternity."

"Here—" Jimper started.

"Quiet," Vallant hissed. "I'd rather be a live mother than whisked."

"Size is not all," Jimper peeped indignantly.

"Now, small ones. Perhaps you'll tell us of your tiny lives—your minuscule affairs, your petty sorrows and triumphs; and who knows? Maybe there'll be a lesson therein for wise T'tun to ponder."

How can it be that they know the speech of the Spril?" Jimper chirped.

"They don't—it's some kind of telepathy; it comes through as English, for me."

"Here—natter not among yourselves; explain your presence—"

"Not so harshly, Yapud; you'll frighten the tiny things."

"None so quick to fear are we!" Jimper piped. "Know that we have passed through many strange adventurings, and no enemy yet has seen our heels!"

"Ah, this could prove diverting! Start at the beginning, bold mite; tell us all."

"Very well," Jimper chirped. "But at the end of my recital, hopeful I am you'll hold out aid to two poor travellers, lost far from home."

"These fleas wish to bargain . . . ?"

"The offer is fair. Begin."

"When Jason the Giant would leave Fair Galliale to seek again his home-land," Jimper chirped, "Jimper was chosen to travel at his side . . ."

THERE was a moment of silence when Jimper, assisted at points by Vallant, had finished his account.

"So," the being called Yapud said, "The mind-fleas admit they burrowed a path through our walls—"

"A remarkable achievement, for such simple creatures," Bro-meta said calmly.

"Hmmp! I see nothing remarkable in the series of blundering near-disasters these fleas managed to devise for themselves; why, even a slight exercise of intelligent effort would have aligned their environment correctly—"

"Yes, Yapud, I've been puzzling over that; and I think I have the answer; these tiny mites dwell in a three-dimensional space—"

"Spare me your allegorical apologia—"

"I'm being quite objective, Yapud! These entities—intelligent entities, too, mind you—are confined to a three dimensional frame of reference; obvious relationships are thus forever beyond their conceptualization."

Vallant and Jimper stood together, watching the vast faces change and writhe like shapes of smoke as the creatures conversed.

"Remind them of their promise, Vallant," Jimper chirped.

Vallant cleared his throat. "Ah

... now, about our difficulty; you see—”

“You mean,” Yapud said, ignoring him, “that they crawl about, cemented to a three-dimensional space, like so many Tridographs?”

“Precisely! As we move about, presenting various three-dimensional views to their gaze, our appearances must seem to alter quite shockingly. Of course, the concept of viewing our actual forms in the hyper-round, from outside, as it were, is quite beyond them!”

“Poof! You’re quite wrong; you’ve already admitted they tunneled into the Hall, which certainly required manipulation in at least four dimensions!”

“Hmmm.” Another pause. “Ah, I see: the tunnel was punched through their space by another more advanced species; look for yourself, Yapud.”

There was another pause. “Well . . . yes, I see what you mean. . . . Odd. . . . Did you notice the orientation of the tunnel?”

“No, I hadn’t—but now that you mention it, I’m beginning to see why these poor creatures have had such a time of it . . .”

“Please, fellows, if you don’t mind,” Vallant spoke up. “My friend and I are hoping you’ll be able to help us out; you see, it’s very important that we get back—”

“That, of course, is out of the question,” Yapud interrupted. “We’ll swat these fleas and plug the hole, and then on to other matters . . .”

“Not so fast, my dear Yapud. The energies required to plug the tunnel would be quite fantastic. You realize, of course, that it constitutes an infinitely-repeating nexus series—”

“All this is very interesting, I’m sure,” Vallant put in, “but unfortunately, it’s over our heads. Couldn’t you just direct us back to our-uh-tunnel—”

“That would do you no good; you’d end in Null space—”

“But it leads to the Tower of the Portal—”

“Surely you understand that since you’re traversing a series of tri-valued pseudo-continua, via—Dear me, I’m afraid you won’t be able to grasp the geometry from your unfortunate three-dimensional viewpoint. But—”

“Here, Brometa, you’re only confusing things. Place yourself in their frame of reference, as you suggested yourself a moment ago. Now—”

“But the Portal opened from the Tower; it has to lead back there—” Vallant insisted.

“Tsk tsk; three-dimensional thinking. No, the tunnel was devised as a means of instantaneous travel between points apparently distant to a tri-dimensional being. Naturally, the energy dis-

placed by such a transposition required release; thus, a non-entropic vector was established to a locus bearing a temporal relationship to the point of origin proportional to the value of C."

"Here," Vallant said desperately. "We're not getting anywhere. Could I just ask a few questions—and could you answer in three-D terms?"

"Very well. That might be simpler."

"Where are we?"

"Ummm. In the Hall of the T'tun, in the Galaxy of Andromeda—and don't say you don't understand; I plucked the concepts from your own vocabulary."

Vallant gulped. "Andromeda?"

"Correct."

"But we were on Galliale—"

"The use of the past tense is hardly correct, since the Portal you used will not be constructed for three million years—in your terms, that is."

"I'm not sure my terms are equal to the job," Vallant said weakly. "How did we happen to get into the past?"

"The velocity of light is a limiting value; any apparent exceeding of this velocity must, of course, be compensated for. This is accomplished by the displacement of mass through quaternary space into the past to a distance equal to the time required by light to make the transit.

Thus, an 'instaneous' transit of ten light years places the traveler ten years in the subjective past, relative to the point of origin—three-dimensionally speaking."

"Ye Gods!" Vallant swallowed. "Andromeda is over a million light years from Earth; when I went through the Portal, I stepped a million years into the past?"

"A million and a half, to be precise."

"But—when the Illimpi came to Galliale through the Portal, they didn't go into the past—or did they?"

"Oh, I see; there's a further projection of the tunnel, leading . . . Brometa, how curious! The tunnel actually originates here on the site of the Hall! Just a moment, while I scan through. . . ."

VALLANT," Jimper piped, "what does it all mean?"

"I'm not sure. It seems the Illimpi started from here in Andromeda—and threw a link across to our Galaxy; then they went through, and colonized Galliale—a million and a half years in their past. When I stepped through the Portal, I dumped us another million and a half years back—three million years from Cessus—"

"And, of course," Brometa said, "the Gateway between Galliale and Olantea will be a similar

link, when it is built; it will span merely twenty light-years—"

"Aha!" Vallant exclaimed. "So that's why no one ever comes back from the Cave of No Return, Jimper—they step twenty years into the past when they go out—and another twenty when they come back!"

"Then I came back to Galliale forty years ere I departed?" Jimper squeaked. "Small wonder King Tweeple was leaner, and knew me not . . ."

"But the Niss—the ones that poured through the Gateway into Galliale, back when the Giants were killed off—"

"*Twenty thousand years ago,*" Yapud put in.

"Huh? How do you know?" Vallant said, surprised.

"*How? Why, I simply examined the data—*"

"Remember," Brometa put in, "*your three-valued space places unnatural limitations on your ability to perceive reality. Three-dimensional 'time' is a purely illusory discipline—*"

"Please, no extended theoretical discourse, Brometa! I'm answering the flea's questions!"

"So twenty thousand years ago, the Niss invaded Galliale from Olantea—and dropped twenty years into their past in the process. They couldn't go back, because they'd step out into Olantea, another twenty years earlier—"

"—where they promptly expired, as is their custom when surrounded by their enemies," Yapud cut in. "*However, on Galliale, they were successful—for a while. When they came, they blazed a path before them with disruptor beams; then they spread plagues which only the Spril survived.*"

"And then the Spril wiped out the Niss, by hiding and picking them off." Vallant put in. "But . . . the Galliales should have warned the Olanteans; the invasion came from Olantea—twenty years in the future—and they were in communication with the Olantea of twenty years in the past—"

"*They had no opportunity; the Niss held the Gateway. On Olantea, the Niss struck with blind ferocity from space; they descended first on the Olantean satellite; there they set up an engine with the power to shatter worlds. To save the mother world, the Olanteans launched a desperate assault. They carried the Dome under which the Engine had been assembled, and then, quickly, before they could be overcome, they triggered the energies buried deep in the rock. Thus died the moon of Olantea.*"

"What about the Niss?"

"*It was a terrible defeat—but not final. The mighty detonation of the Olantean moon destroyed the equilibrium of the system;*

vast storms swept the planet; when they ceased, it was seen that Olantea had left its ancient orbit, and drifted now outward and ever outward. Snow covered the gardens and the fountains and the towers of Olantea; the seas froze. A winter came which never Spring would follow.

"The Niss—those who remained—struck again—a last, desperate bid to annihilate their enemies. They attacked Olantea, seized the Gateway to Galliale, and poured in their numbers through it, fleeing the cold that now locked Olantea in a mantle of ice. Their fate, you know."

"But—what happened to Olantea?"

"It found a new orbit at last, far from its sun. You call it Pluto."

"And the remains of the moon are the asteroids," Vallant said, awed. "But—Cessus said that humans were related to the Illimpi . . ."

"Some few Illimpi escaped from dying Olantea to colonize the Earth. There they lived in peace for two hundred centuries—until the first flashes of nuclear explosion summoned the remnant of the Niss from Mars."

"And now they're occupying us," Vallant said. "Snooping around to find a clue to the Portal . . ."

"Bah! That would merely provide us with a plague of the evil

nits!" Brometa burst out. "That, we cannot allow to come to pass. We must give aid to these inoffensive fleas, Yapud—"

"True," Yapud agreed. "I confess I was quite carried away, viewing the Niss onslaught and the death of a world as I did, from the three-dimensional viewpoint. I see now that even these mites have feelings of a sort—and the destruction of beauty is a crime, in any continuum!"

"I suppose the old man—" Vallant stopped suddenly. "He came back—from Galliale! That means he went there—after I met him—and then came back through time, twenty years—"

"Forty years; twenty when he entered Galliale, and twenty more on his departure."

"And he knew! That's why he waited; Jimper! You said he told the King he couldn't leave until the time was right; he posted sentinels by the Gateway to watch the valley of Blue Ice, and settled down to wait. When the Survey Team landed near the Gate, he had his chance!"

"And knowing he would emerge into his past, he brought me with him to prove that he had indeed visited Fair Galliale—"

"But who told him about the Gateway? He—"

"Vallant!" Jimper squeaked. "He came to you, spoke of old days of comradeship, and showed you pictures—"

"Then—that means he was Jason—the same Jason I knew!" Vallant shook his head. "But that means I've already—I mean, will see him again. But how can I get three million years into the future?"

"Yes . . . that is something of a problem," Yapud conceded. "Uh—I know it's asking a lot," Vallant said, "but if you could just transfer us ahead through time . . ."

"No . . . we can scan it—as you visually scan space when you stare into your night sky—but as for travelling in substance—or transmitting three-dimensional beings—"

"Wait—I have a thought," Brometa put in. "You spoke of the three-dimensional framework; why not . . ." the conversation turned to technicalities.

VALLANT," Jimper piped. "Will I ever see again the towers of Galliale?"

"We'll know in a minute; they seem to be discussing ways and means . . ."

". . . the whisk would be simpler," Yapud was saying, impatiently.

"These Illimpi," Brometa said. "It's just occurred to me that they're remote descendants of ours, Yapud! We can't allow these Niss-fleas to trouble them."

"Impossible!"

"But the relationship is quite obvious, once you examine it—"

"Nonsense! Next you'll be saying these fleas are our kin!"

"Hmmm. As to that, they appear to be ancestral to the Illimpi—"

Nonsense! They're the degenerate descendants of the Illimpi who escaped from freezing Olan-tea to Earth!"

"True—but later, they crossed space via mechanical FTL drive, and colonized Andromeda; later, they recolonized the Milky Way via the Portal—"

"Then it's quite clear!" Yapud exclaimed. "I told you the Illimpi were no descendants of ours. These mites are our remotest ancestors!"

"Ancestors?"

"Certainly; they will set up a Portal here, a few years from now, and use it to retransmit themselves to the Milky Way, an additional million and a half years in the past, and from there, they will reestablish a new link to Andromeda, three million years prior to now, and so on, in order to study their past—"

"Stop!" Vallant called. "You're making my head ache. Compared to this, the business of Jason and I telling each other about the Gateway is nothing! But how can I start the ball rolling if I'm stranded here?"

"Obviously, we can't allow that to happen," Brometa said.

"There's no telling what it might do to the probability stress-patterns. But as to how—"

"Just a minute, Brometa," Yapud cut in. "Place yourself in their three-valued universe for a moment; if the transit were made strictly within the parameters of their curious geometry, the aleph and gimel factors would cancel out nicely—"

"Why—how obvious! It should have occurred to me, Yapud!"

"Have you thought of something?" Vallant asked anxiously.

"Fleas, if we place you back in your native spatiotemporal coordinates, will you pledge yourselves to purge your galaxy of Niss? We'll prepare a simple pesticide for you; an elementary excitor effect should be adequate; direct it on a Niss and the creature will blaze up nicely, without affecting other forms of energy concentration. I think a range of one light year for the hand model should do . . ."

"I'll attend to preparing a suitable three-dimensional capsule," Yapud put in. "Rather amusing to realize that these fleas can be confined merely by drawing a plane about them . . ." his voice faded.

"What are you going to do?" Vallant asked nervously. "I hope you're keeping in mind that we don't live long enough for any really extended processes . . ."

"We'll give you a . . . ah . . ."

ship, I think the term is. It will travel at a velocity just under that of electromagnetic radiation—and will follow a route which will require three million years for the transit to your home galaxy. Naturally, the subjective elapsed time aboard will be negligible. The duration of the voyage will be adjusted with precision so as to place you in the close vicinity of Earth at the same time that you departed. We'll take a moment to encapsulate the vessel in certain stress patterns, which will render it impervious to unwelcome interference by the Niss or any others—"

With a whoosh! of displaced air which sent Vallant and Jimp-er skittering across the spongy plain, a gleaming, hundred-foot hull swooped down to settle gently a hundred yards away.

"I've taken the precaution of installing a duplicator for the production of the anti-Niss weapons," Yapud said; "just set it up in any convenient location and shovel dirt in the hopper at the top—and stand well back from the delivery chute."

"One other detail," Brometa added. "Since the Illimpi will be our ancestors, I think we owe it to them to help all we can. If we nudge Olantea from its cold orbit and guide it back to its ancient position, fifth from the Sun, once more it will flower. There seem to be some fifty million Illimpi still

there, carefully frozen in special vaults under the ice, awaiting rescue. We can time matters so that they thaw as the Earth-fleas eliminate the last of the Niss.

"That should be a joyous reunion. I note that the first of the new colonists will begin to cross to Galliale as soon as the haik follows the fleas here . . ."

"What of Jimper?" the Spril piped. "Long have I fared from the hills of Fair Galliale . . ."

"Don't worry, Jimper. I'll drop you off; you'll arrive home another twenty years in your past, but I guess it can't be helped."

Jimper looked startled. "I have but remembered another fanciful tale, told to me long ago, by the father of my grandfather, when he was well gone in strong ale. He told of venturing into the Tower, and travelling far, only to return at last to Galliale . . ."

"The old boy had a tale for every occasion," Vallant said.

"You fail to grasp the implication," Jimper sighed. "For him was I named, Vallant . . ."

ABOARD the ship, Vallant slept for a week. When he awoke, Pluto hung silver-black in the viewport. He brought the vessel in over the Blue Ice Mountains, settled it by the cave, watched as Jimper scampered to its opening, turned to wave, and disappeared within.

Nine days later, he swept past startled Niss patrols to slide into Earth's atmosphere; one alien vessel which came too near plunged out of control into the Atlantic.

Vallant landed in wooded country north of Granyauck, left the ship by night, caught a ride into the city. On the campus of the University Complex, he found the vast dormitory in which Jason Able was housed, followed numbers until he reached his room. He knocked. A tall, square-jawed red-head opened the door.

"Oh, hi, Ame," he said. "Been on a trip?"

"I guess you could say that. Pour me a beer, Jase, and I'll tell you all about it . . ." **THE END**

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"The pattern was always the same. The rapid patter and splend did showmanship of the drummer, the skill to attract attention away from him, a few shabby magic tricks and strange sounding incantations, then the pitch . . ."

The Last of the Great Tradition

By JAMES R. HORSTMAN

PROFESSOR Argol, finger to the wind as usual, quickly appraised the impact of the first Sputnik launching and, for the first time in thirty years, unpacked all of his meager belongings in a small hotel room in Vista, California, and settled down to lead the good life.

"At long last we're going straight, George m'boy," he said, surveying the results of the day's shopping trip.

"No more Nebraska dust or

boiled corn dinners for the likes of us. From now on, it's first class all-the-way!"

George Washington Carver-Spokes (the hyphen was never successfully explained) eyes his master with suspicion. How many times had he seen that look during his faithful years of service—playing variously the role of American Indian, African Indian, Zulu Warrior, Arabian Prince and Sinister Oriental, depending on the current stock of

patent nostrums and the contents of the makeup box.

"First class, George. And I've got good news."

The professor drew from a battered shopping bag a blue serge suit, patent leather opera pumps and a dozen yards of narrow white cloth.

"You have just been reincarnated."

"Reen-carnated, Doc Mysto? Don't rightly know what that means, but I'm sure as hell gonna have to learn a hole, brand new roo-teen," sighed George.

"An' just when I was gettin' that stuff about the Ee-gyptian Scarey-beetles down pat."

"Scarab, George, Scarab Beetles," intoned the professor, and remember, it's not 'Doctor Mysto' any more. Certain folks in these parts are too eager to hear that name again.

"It's 'Argol'—Professor Jeremiah Argol, pioneer in the borderlands of science, voyager to Venus and beyond, mapper of the Martian canals and familiar of the inhabitants of the celestial spheres. Got that now, George?"

"God damn!" said George with a touch of admiration. "That's sure some pedigree, Doc . . . uh . . . Professor. Do it mean anything?"

"Besides infinite riches for both of us, George, it means you can toss out the rest of that smelly batch of herb medicine and the

boxes of Instant Tiger's Milk. And, oh, unpack the rest of these."

He threw George a purple-covered, wretchedly printed paperback bearing the legend, *The Message of the Saucer Men; from the Interplanetary Papers of Prof. J. P. Argol, DIS*, and, at the bottom, "Cosmic Brotherhood Press."

"Saucer Men!" snorted the servant. "Scarey Beetles! Mumbo Jumbo! Bad damn day when I took up with the likes of you!"

"Now, George, stop your grumbling. Practice tying that turban while I compose a suitable script for opening night. From now on, you're our Visitor from Outer Space—Venus, I think . . . that's it, Venus—come to bring us Earthlings the Gospel of Interplanetary Brotherhood and Love."

"Venus," said George. "Venus, Georgia, maybe." Yet, he continued his patient struggle with the yards of white cloth.

DEVisING a new "script," as he called it, was no problem for the professor. He had been over this ground many times before. As a showman, the last, perhaps, of the Great Tradition, he felt obliged to update and revise his performances periodically to fit the changing tastes of his public—and to minimize the risk of having his miracles unveiled by a

bored audience who would remember to watch his hands.

The pattern was always the same. The rapid patter and splendid showmanship of the drummer, the shill, George, garbed richly and mysteriously to attract attention away from him, a few shabby magic tricks and strange-sounding incantations, then the pitch—be it patent medicines, love portions or copies of his latest “revelations” cheaply printed by a mail order vanity press.

Nor did the source for recipes, phrases, or inspiration, ever vary. A battered copy of Albertus Magnus’ *Egyptian Secrets* was all the authority he needed.

“Let’s see,” he mused, thumbing its ragged pages. “Rabhq . . . Haxbl . . . no. Too hard to pronounce.”

His eye was taken by a mysterious diagram.

S A T O R
A R E P O
T E N E T
O P E R A
R O T A S

“Mmmmm. That’s more like it,” he muttered. “Sator-Arepo-Tenet . . . opera sounds too common . . . maybe just that much. Sator . . . Arepo . . . Tenet. Satora Repo Tenet. That’s it! *Satora Repo Tenet*, the message of Intergalactic Brotherhood,

the Cosmic love song! *Satora Repo Tenet. Satora Repo Tenet.*”

* * *

“*Satora Repo Tenet!*” the professor said in an almost worshipful tone. “That is the message of universal love and understanding brought to us from the eternities of space by our beloved Brother Aquavar.”

He bestowed a look of universal love and understanding on the seated figure of George, looking just a trifle nauseous under the pale green makeup which had been added as an after thought.

“I was overjoyed when Aquavar agreed to return with me here from the deserts of Mexico to bring his cosmic message to you people of California—and hence, to the entire world.

“For, the text of tonight’s ‘sermon’ is not a sectional message. Its power is not limited to a select few, to a single nation. The Satora of Aquavar is a message of peace and good will among men everywhere.

“And I assure you, friends, once Aquavar and I have ‘conquered’ the state of California with this universal doctrine, we shall cover the entire United States with its promise of hope . . . and from there, we will enlist all of the peace-loving peoples of the planet Earth in this magnificent cause.”

A spattering of applause interrupted the professor's last words, but the look of rapt attention soon returned to the fifty-odd faces in the small, store-front "New Space Age Headquarters," garishly decorated with symbolic flags representing each of the planets and one, covered with mystic symbols gleaned from Magnus' great work, which was the Banner of the Cosmic Brotherhood, given to Argol by his master, Aquavar.

The crowd itself was not unusual for Southern California; cultists, largely, of middle age and somewhat drab appearance, pursuing their own Holy Grail through the occult disciplines—health foods, naprapathy, astrology—in a pathetic, desperate search for some meaning in life. They now were eager to pursue this latest "Way" to its fullest, in hopes that here, at last, they would find an easy, guaranteed road to salvation.

And Professor Argol knew his followers well—knew them from the sun-baked plains of Iowa and the shabby side streets of Detroit, from the world-weary meaningless clots of people in all the tent shows and store fronts and carnivals of a dozen states and a hundred towns.

He knew its loneliness, its urgent need. And he played it like an immense organ, played on its

fears, its superstitions, on its pathetic, unfulfilled hopes. But to anyone who was not a member of that group of believers, his atheism was manifest. As he looked over the faces of his disciples—or those of Aquavar—he had difficulty quelling the contempt he felt for their sheep-like naivete in swallowing what to him was so transparent.

"*Satora Repo Tenet*," he said, with just a trace of scorn.

Suddenly, one face stood out among the many.

The professor looked.

The face looked back.

"The coming revolution will unite us all," he declared. "Not a revolution of tanks and guns, but one of peace and understanding that will topple the tyrants and restore the little people—those who are not afraid to believe—to their rightful inheritance. The dawn of a new age for all mankind."

NEVER, in forty years of not infrequent affairs with some of the choicest flowers of the Great Plains, had he seen anything quite like her.

"Watch closely now, while I unveil to you one of the great secrets brought to us by beloved Aquavar from the far reaches of the outermost dimensions."

Blonde, about twenty-five, yet, somehow . . . ageless. From what he could see, a downright

voluptuous body. Intelligent looking yet . . . older and wiser than she should have been.

"So you see, my friends, the mysteries of life and death—of mere matter—are as nothing to our brothers beyond . . ."

Ageless, timeless, ethereal, almost. Like an ancient Greek statue. Not obviously sexy in her cool chiffon, yet one perceived behind her lavender eyes a sort of churning, writhing thing that harkened back to things primeval, to fertility cults, to magic and to devilish worship, to pagan rites that were already ancient at the dawn of history.

The professor looked again.

She boldly returned his gaze, conscious now of his eyes upon her.

" . . . the farthest planet. Here lies the promise of a new life for all."

He faltered on somehow, hardly aware of what he was saying. He looked again and almost blushed at the look she returned—a look that started at his toes, seemed to pierce through to his very soul, ended at the tip of his nose, and could only be described as . . . his mind reeled . . . lascivious.

Holding his gaze, she stretched luxuriously, like a cat, bringing her hands together in her lap and squeezing her ample breasts up and out. Her right

eye closed in what, even to the professor's failing vision, was unmistakably a wink. Argol's knees turned to jelly. A hot iron burned its way into his midsection.

"My account of the entire journey . . . purple-cover . . . never before . . . only two dollars . . . desk as you leave . . . gratefully accepted." He hurried on automatically, mindful of only one person, one unearthly vision, in that sweaty, crowded room.

But he recovered briefly to deliver the clincher:

"And . . . please remember, friends, take home with you tonight the words of our most holy brother Aquavar, the words of universal brotherhood and cosmic comprehension, *Satora Repo Tenet!*"

He looked triumphantly at the blonde.

"*Satora Repo Tenet,*" she said, obviously with great emotion. She got to her feet.

THE house lights went on, and George Washington Carver-Spokes put a cracked phonograph record on a hidden player and patiently waited for the crowd to clear so that he could collect the money for book and pamphlet sales from the professor's lady "volunteers" and sweep out the place for the next evening's performance.

Argol rudely dismissed a little band of admirers and stood waiting for her. It seemed like an hour before she reached the podium, but as she approached, her eyes shone, her smile was one of heady anticipation.

"*Satora Repo Tenet*," she said again, breathlessly. It was like the myriad voices of a celestial choir. Almost against his own will, he made a mental note of the effect that voice would have on an audience.

Their hands met, and without another word, she led him out of the headquarters into the cool night air, then down a quiet suburban street. Her air of decision and the obvious urgency of her pace filled the awkward silence and stilled his thousand questions. He followed her obediently, thrilled by the touch of her delicate hand and even more by the rhythmic sway of her body and the way she filled out a tight jersey dress.

She led him past lighted houses and into the lush farmland which surrounds Vista. They left the road and began cutting across fields studded with little patches of woods. Once, when he paused to help her over a low board fence and her moon-frosted hair brushed his cheek, he reached for her, but she easily slipped out of reach and danced ahead. She looked back and smiled.

"*Satora Repo Tenet*," she whispered.

They passed through a low thicket and came out on a broad meadow which shone in the pale October moon. Her pace quickened, and a little cry of excitement escaped her lips. The professor sensed they had reached the end of their journey and looked around to see what romantic setting—what wooded glen or quiet cave—she had chosen for their tryst. His throat was dry with excitement; his loins ached for her.

Then he saw it.

At the far edge of the meadow, a huge, low, perfectly smooth sausage-shaped object hugged the ground, emitting a soft green glow which was more than a reflection.

She headed straight for it, running now, dragging the professor behind.

Suddenly, he was very much afraid.

He tried to draw back, but her grip tightened. Half stumbling, half dragged, he crossed the field, saw the machine loom ahead, nearly fainted as a bright sliver of light grew slowly wider as an entrance slid open at ground level. It was apparent now that this was nothing made by man.

He fought to free himself, wondering how this frail girl could exert such force. He looked

down at his hand, held vise-like in hers, and gasped.

As he watched in fascinated horror, the delicate fingers grew, elongated, changed shape; each one became a green, scaly tentacle which blindly groped in the air, found his sleeve and began to curl around his arm.

The professor screamed in terror.

"Satora Repo Tenet!" she shouted, carrying her lover into the spacelock.

"Wow!" said George Washington Carver-Spokes, peering from behind a bush at the far edge of the meadow. "That sure enough was some gran' fee-nally!"

* * *

The crowd hushed as the somber, turbaned figure took the podium in the tiny store-front cubicle bedecked with the colorful flags of all the planets.

"Fren's," he began, "the tex' of tonight's 'sermon' is not a sectional message; its power is not limited to a selec' few, to a single nation. The Satora of Aquavar is a message of peace an' goodwill among all men.

"When I stood on the edge of that field an' watched our ascended master Argol step forth into the exter-terrestrial machine and sail away in a burst of lightnin' with his cosmic brothers and sisters, his last word to me"

THE END

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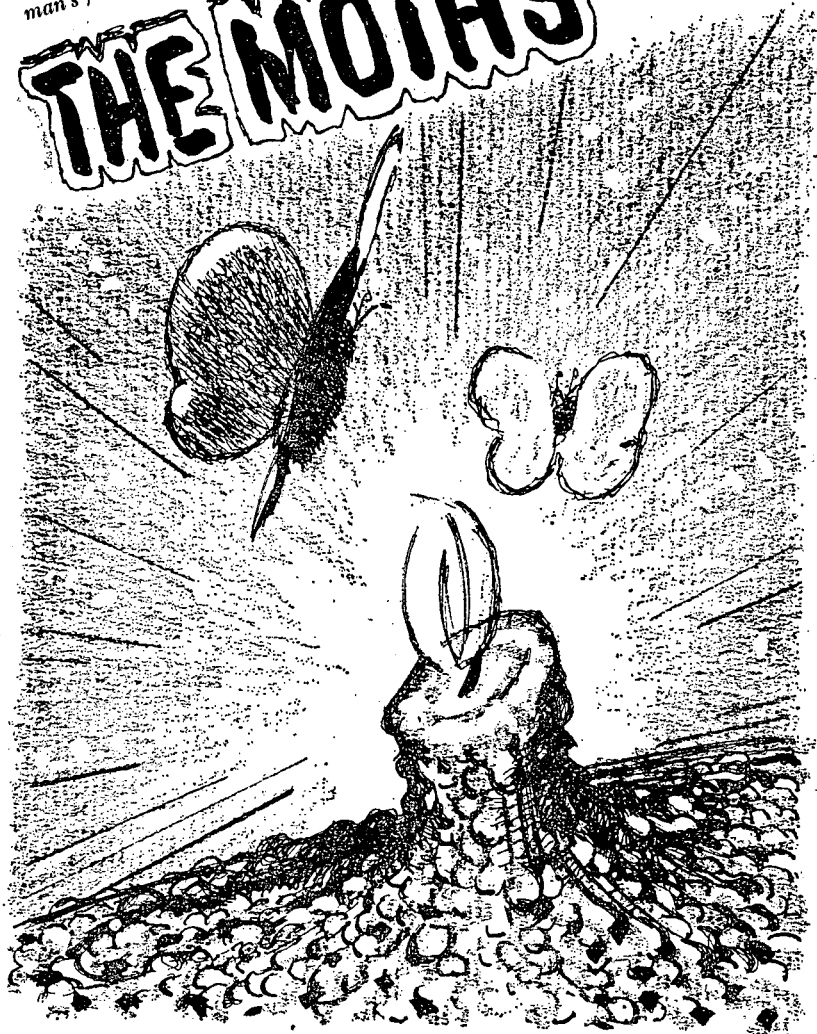
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A once-great
biologist . . . a candle
flame in a shack . . . a moth
in the flame—and a
man's future resting on the next move.

By **ARTHUR PORGES**
Illustrated by **SHELLING**

THE MOTHS



BEFORE he became an alcoholic recluse—and that was many years ago; more than he could remember now, even in his brief intervals of sobriety—Gene Temple had been a promising biologist. Even in his present state, there were times when he paused in his rambling walks, with a kind of shock of recognition, to discover that some flitting insect, darting lizard, or soaring hawk brought Latin names to his lips—names he knew were accurate, but forgotten for years.

In the beginning, it had been a brief episode of unprofessional carelessness that had ruined his career. He had allowed a species of beetle, highly destructive of several vital food plants, and permitted into this country only under the most rigid conditions of experiments in isolation, to escape from the laboratory. Only desperate measures by other entomologists, heavily supported with government money, had kept the insect from doing irreparable harm to a whole state; and even now, almost forty years later, the beetle still required constant control by special pesticides.

Only a few of his intimates knew what lay behind his hours of carelessness: the death of a beloved young wife, taken by a painful disease, and the wild distraction that followed. Almost

insane with grief, Temple had not even known, until months later, that he had left the wire cage open, and permitted a dozen gravid beetles to escape on their strong wings. Nor had he offered any excuses; just his resignation. After that, although there were few enough jobs open to him, he refused the ones available, and disappeared.

At first, he felt only guilt and misery, but over the years a new emotion drowned out the others: it was resentment. Resentment of his colleagues for not defending him more vigorously; resentment of the press, for treating him like a criminal; and finally, a general, vague resentment of the whole world, which, he became convinced, had abused him just as it had abused so many other talented people.

That all these charges were exaggerated, not to say quite unfounded, was a fact lost to his befuddled brain, poisoned by too much alcohol.

LYING on the filthy cot in a shack long since abandoned by its original owner, Temple tended to daydream about the past, seeing himself as a brilliant young scientist unfairly crushed by fate—this in the loss of Julie, his wife—and then callously mistreated by the public. He had visions of the discoveries he might have made, which

the world must now do without. A cure for cancer, based on his notion—how long ago was that?—about gall insects and their plant-tumors; people would miss that, all right! Or those nettles, with fiercely viable thick roots; if one could graft fruits and more valuable plants to such hardy growths, nothing in the way of insects or fungi could injure the crops; you couldn't kill one of those blasted nettles with a flame-thrower! Sure, it was not easy; apples and weeds don't graft worth a damn; but with new radioactive techniques—to destroy the rejection reactions—an ingenious young man could do wonders. Young man, Temple thought wryly; I'm pushing seventy—or is it sixty; well, it feels like ninety.

He turned on the soiled coverlet, groaning, and touched his abdomen gingerly. Through the shrunken tissue he could feel a great mass, thick and spongy. That was only just the granddaddy, he knew; its children and grandchildren were widespread throughout his body. A matter of months; maybe weeks. Well, the sooner the better. That freeway was coming closer, and this miserable patch of weeds—fifty acres of worthless gully—would soon be gobbled up, leaving him as homeless as some rodent scooped out of its nest by a plough. And there was no place

else to go. Here the \$20 a month from Julie's little estate kept him alive, after a fashion, and even supplied with popskull, provided he ate stale bread, beans, and didn't disdain hand-outs in town. Yes, better to end it here than in some charity ward, lying in his own filth, with bored, harrassed, underpaid state attendants waiting for him to die.

It was getting dark. Ordinarily he didn't mind that, because dreaming was easier in the absence of light. Julie's elfin face became clearer as the dusk flowed into the shack; and he could see again the shining lab equipment, and the lovely phase microscope.

But this evening, the night was unwelcome; it hinted at the other Night, soon to be upon him—a Night he believed eternal. That didn't matter, either. If he were simple-minded enough to think Julie waited beyond, he would be too stupid to qualify as a scientist; better intellectual honesty than the comfort of idiotic myths. Shakespeare said it all, the whole story; there was more convincing theology in "Macbeth" than in St. Thomas, Calvin, Barth, Luther—the whole silly crowd. A Tale told by an Idiot, full of Sound and Fury, signifying Nothing. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. All you had to do was take a good look at the world.

Children dying in agony everywhere; evil flourishing; the good at bay, helpless. If I were designing the Universe, Temple told himself, not for the first time, I'd make health catching instead of disease. Perfect Design—hogwash. Did a poor grub have to be eaten alive by gnat-larvae to make God's work perfect? What nonsense!

But this wasn't helping the growing darkness. There was half a candle left somewhere. He sat up, grunting, and hunted for it. He found the stump wax-welded to the bottom of a tuna can, lit it, and stood it on a packing case. It reminded him of Mark Twain's joke. Need to light another candle to see this one, he told himself. Sighing, he stumbled back to the cot. From under the bedclothes he dragged a wine-bottle; it had only a few drops left. He sucked at the mouth, muttered a curse, and tossed the empty to a corner of the hut. Then he lay on one side, conscious of the lump in his middle, watching the candle.

THEN the moth came, right through the glassless, unscreened window. He followed its flight incuriously—at first—then with growing interest. Surely that was a *Melittia gloriosa* cookei! He blinked incredulously. This extremely rare subspecies of the beautiful man root

borer moth had been known only in this county; but that was almost fifty years back; it was believed extinct in 1918, for that matter. He himself hadn't seen one before except in a collection. He was too interested in the find to be surprised at the tenacity of his memory.

The big moth, with its black and yellow abdomen, brownish forewings, and orange hind wings, was a striking sight as it fluttered near the candleflame.

Temple squinted blearily, half minded to save the rare insect. Then he saw something else, something he couldn't quite believe. The candle flame sputtered; that should have meant a crippled moth, with scorched wings, but there was no sign of injury as the big insect resumed its flight. Obviously, Temple told himself, it hadn't really stayed in the flame. Then he gulped; the moth hovered directly over the yellow tip, seeming to run its abdomen through the fire. The candle dimmed again, and now the insect paused in the very heart of the flame. Then it flew out, strong and unhurt.

Temple struggled to his feet. The moth alighted on the packing case, and shooting out one hand with astonishing deftness, the man captured it.

Even from the feel of its wings, he knew wonder. Holding it nearer the flame, Temple

studied the pulsating insect. Not a cookei after all—there were differences, slight but unmistakeable to an expert. This was a mutant; why, the wings were like metal foil, almost; no wonder the flame didn't hurt them. A female, too, and loaded with eggs, by God!

He turned a grimy tumbler over the moth, and hastily improvised from a cardboard box and a scrap of hardware cloth; it was a poor excuse for a cage, but it would do. Temple forgot that he was old and sick, and gloated over the moth until the candle died out. If there was another, he couldn't find it, and returned to the cot, his brain frenetically active.

A mutant; more than that, a wildly improbable and unheard of one. Considering how rare the basic species was, it might even be true—it almost certainly was true—that this moth was unique; no other in the whole world. But with eggs. He must see if she bred true. Would the new generation be able to hover in candle flames, and why should they, anyhow? What was the survival value, if any?

Lying there in the summer dark, he stiffened suddenly. Energy! What else; it had to be that. The moth drew energy directly from the flame. No, it was too wild; too silly; too unscientific. And yet . . . And yet, he

told himself sternly, prove it; then talk.

It was hours before he slept, and not restfully; he had strange dreams.

THE next day the moth laid her eggs—and died. Temple watched over them as broodingly as any hen. When they hatched, he offered them sumach roots, which was one of staples of the parent species. The larvae were quite uninterested; nothing tempted them, and yet they grew. Squirming restlessly in the sun, their bodies expanded, and finally they spun cocoons. From these they emerged after a remarkably short period of metamorphosis. Temple saw with delight that most of them bred true, having the same stigmata as their mother, even to the black crescent on the hindwings.

They clung weakly to the plant-stems he had provided for their silk-work. Clung until the sun reached them, then they bowed towards it with wings held forward like cloaks. And still they refused all food; sugar, honey, syrup—the things moths love did not tempt these at all. Daily they bowed to the sun, and would have flown miles, if free. Moths seeking the sun; it was something to excite an entomologist, even if he were a dying man.

Temple had a last dream.

These moths, the only one in the world, were energy converters, drawing their life from fire—sunfire, candle-fire, no doubt others. In their tiny bodies was the answer to the earth's energy needs. Fusion had turned out a bust. Fossil fuels were about gone; the world was overpopulated and hungry. He, Temple, could save the world; that's what it amounted to. All he had to do was produce these moths. The scientists might be skeptical, but they couldn't pass up any angles—not these days. In modern labs, forty years ahead of his, they could wrest from the insects the most precious secret of the century—of all the ages, in fact: direct conversion of energy from the sun. Sure, he could save the world, but why should he?

The moths fluttered restlessly under the screening. They were anxious to be free, to use their bubbling energy, to propagate their kind. Nature would never hit on their like again. Whatever fantastic combination of genes, of DNA, had brought them into being, and from so rare a subspecies, was not going to happen again soon. It would take millions of years, at best, and the earth couldn't spare them; not man's earth.

Temple felt old and ill; the mass in his stomach pulled him towards the ground. What were

moths to him, or science, or the people of the world? Let them starve in their stupid, crowded billions!

He put the cage on the splintered boards of the floor, and crunched down heavily with his right foot. There was a flash of bright flame; he felt its heat even through the thick sole. Then a sound as of a large fuse blowing. He lifted the shoe. Greenish pulp. No more beauty; no more eager power—just green ooze.

He lurched to the bed, dropped face down, and fumbled blindly in the tangle of bedclothes. He found a bottle actually a third full, and blinked at it in delighted wonder . . .

At dusk, after much grumbling and searching, he found an inch of thick, green candle. He stuck it to the edge of the packing case, and flopped back on the cot, to watch it. But he knew no more moths would come.

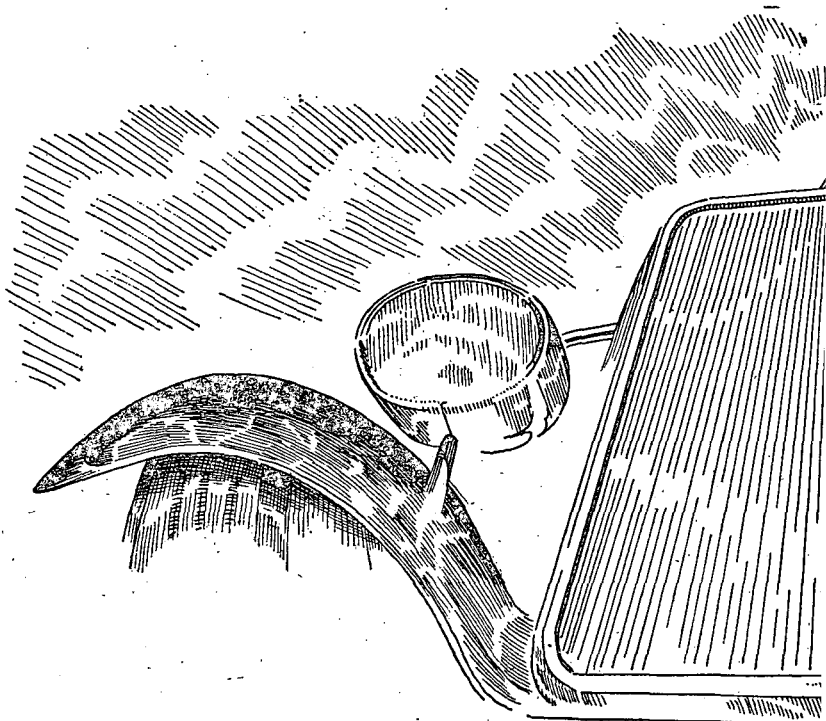
A little later, he died. The candle guttered out, but a tiny flame arose on the corner of the wooden case.

When the shack was one great arrowhead of flame, two moths arrived from different directions out of the summer night. Each had a pair of black crescents. They hovered ecstatically in the withering updraught, glowing like jewels. Then they mated.

THE END

The Quest of the

Next time you get into your autom — er, we mean, manmobile, make sure you know who's driving: you, or it. Here's a comic, satiric, outrageously original story that may advance pedestrianism by years.



Illustrated by ADRAGNA

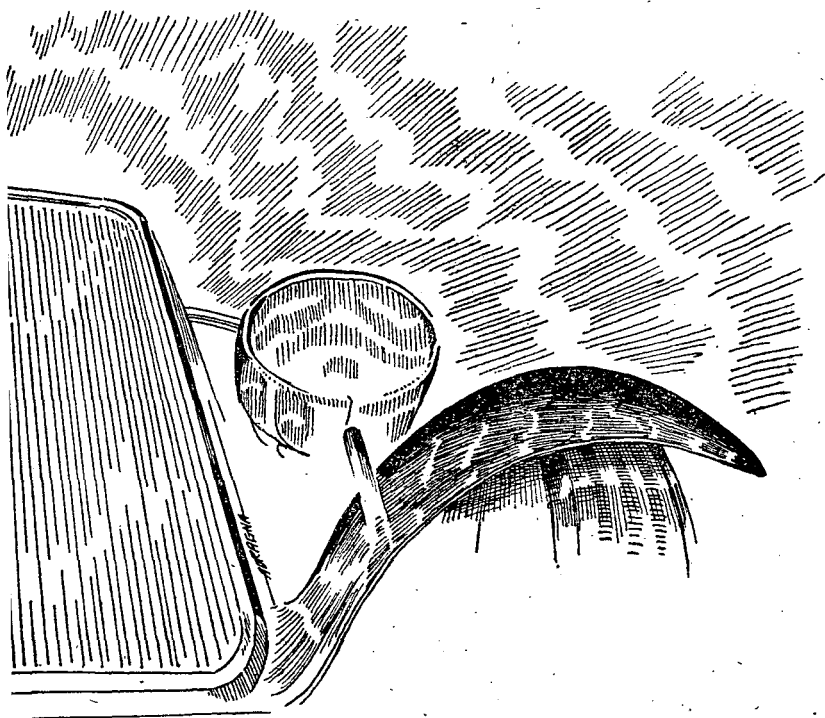
Holy Grille

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

HOUSING had never been one to go chasing after girlhicles. Girlhicles were forever having visions and were forever telling you about them, and anyway, there were more important things in life than getting your oil changed. He much preferred the peace and quiet of his garage to the roar and bustle of the high-

ways, and he had always been content to spend most of his evenings at home, meditating upon the nature of manmobilekind.

Of late, however, a strange restlessness had come over him. Part of it, he knew, could be attributed to the season of the year, but the other part could not be. It was this second part that



troubled Housing the most, because it drove him to ask himself certain questions that he couldn't even begin to answer. These questions were three in number, and were as follows: (1) If the purpose of manmobilekind wasn't for boyhicles to chase girlhicles, what *was* the purpose of manmobilekind? (2) If Godmobile liked regular menmobiles as much as everybody said He did, why had He created truckmenmobiles? And (3) Did human beings, as vehicular beings maintained, rationalize everything *they* did, in order to convince themselves that *they* had free will; or did vehicular beings rationalize everything *they* did, in order to convince themselves that *they* had free will?

On a Friday evening late in April Housing went next door to visit his friendhicle Axle, hoping through the catharsis of conversation to rid himself of his growing doubts. Axle was getting ready to go out, and his youngest servo-pilot—an attractive young female (by people standards)—had just finished giving him a wash job and was rubbing him down with a chamois cloth. "Hi, Housing," he said to our hero-hicle. "What're you doing away from the garage this late at night?"

Axle wasn't in the least bit like Housing. He was downright rakish in appearance, and had

H.P. written all over him. Housing, on the other wheel, was the quiet type, conservative of line and unostentatious of color tone, and to look at him you'd never guess the strength and determination that was inbred in his every bolt and bearing.

He chose to ignore his friendhicle's snide remark, and after his servo-pilot—a handsome young male (by people standards)—joined Axle's and began giving her an assist with the polishing job, he said reprovingly, "I should think, Axle, that you could stay home one night out of the year at least."

Roguish glints danced in Axle's wide-apart headlights. "I couldn't stay home on a night like this even if I wanted to, old palhicle. Why, the girlhicles would go out of their transmissions. They'd tow me right out of my garage!"

"Girlhicles! Is that all you ever think about, Axle?"

"Practically. Did you come over to borrow something, Housing? If I remember right, the last time you came over you were out of Simonize. Did you run out of it again?"

"There you go, Axle—ascribing materialistic motives to everything a manmobile does. No, I didn't run out of Simonize, and I no longer permit any of my servo-pilots to Simonize me in any case. When I want the job done,

I go to a professional servo-Simonizer and get it done right. I came over to talk."

"Well go ahead then—talk. I like to talk—especially about you know what."

"The subject I had in transmission," Housing said coldly, "does concern girlhicles, but not in the vulgar sense you take for granted. As it happens, I've been doing considerable thinking lately about boyhicle-girlhicle relationships as they pertain to the purpose of manmobilekind, and some rather serious doubts have arisen in my transmission. I—I thought that it might help me to get things straightened out if I talked the matter over with a practical manmobile—about town like you."

A XLE grunted deep in his crankcase. "Housing, do you know what's really wrong with you? You stay home too much. You're becoming a regular garage plant. Why, you're almost two years old and I'll bet you haven't had your oil changed yet! It's bad enough that young and healthy young menmobiles like us should have to be tied down to a public parking meadow eight hours a day, five and sometimes six days a week just so our elder servo-pilots can provide us with the luxuries of life without deliberately tying ourselves down after we get home. We owe it to

ourselves to go out and have a good time. Look, why don't you come along with me tonight?—it'll do you good. You can do your talking on the highway. I'll listen—I promise."

"I'm—I'm not sure I should. I—I don't exactly fit into the highway crowd. And besides, you'll only go hotwheeling it after the first girlhicle who comes along."

"No I won't—honest." As though everything were all settled, Axle's servo-pilot went into the servo-quarters to get ready, and Housing's servo-pilot got behind Housing's wheel. "Well, what do you say, old palhicle?" Axle went on. "Want to ramble with me?"

Still uncertain, Housing said, "My bad piston's been acting up lately. I really don't think I ought to—"

"You and your bad piston! Do you know what I think, Housing? I think that bad piston of yours is just an excuse you made up so you can hang around the garage all the time."

"It is not! It's a reprocreation defect. It doesn't get enough oil. It never did."

"I still say it's an excuse."

Housing started himself up in a huff. "All right. Just to show you it's not an excuse, I *will* ramble with you."

"Fine. Come on, old palhicle—let's go!"

They stopped at a swank

service cafe for a bite to eat, Axle had 10.5 gallons of hi-test, two quarts of hyperlube, and a can of Lard-ol. Housing had 12.3 gallons of regular, a quart of superlube, and two cans of Lard-ol. Afterward, he had the waiter polish his windshield and check his tires. He felt much better when he and Axle hit the highway again. By this time night had fallen, and a big fat moon was pulling into the black-topped parking meadow of the sky.

"This is the life!" Axle shouted over his right tailfin. "This is what we were réprocarated for. Whooo-eee!"

The highway was a four-lane one. Housing pulled into the passing lane and synchronized his speed with Axle's. "Are you sure, Axle?" he said eagerly. "Are you sure it wasn't for a much finer purpose?"

"What could be finer than this? Look at that moon! Feel that wind! Feast your headlights on that girlhicle up ahead! Whooo-ooo-eeeeee!"

"I mean," Housing persisted, "a purpose that would justify all the trouble Godmobile went to to create us and to endow us with so many wonderful gifts. It does not seem to me that he would have gone to such pains just so boyhicles could zoom the highways and chase girlhicles. It just doesn't. You see, Axle, it's different with us than it is with people

and other lower forms of life. When boys chase girls they do it not only because it's their natural instinct but because it's people's way of procreating themselves. But we menmobiles don't procreate that way. We procreate through reprocarnation, and regardless of whether boyhicles get their oil changed, manmobilekind will go right on increasing in numbers. So when we chase girlhicles, we're not really accomplishing anything. We're not furthering manmobilekind's interests in any way, shape, or manner. Some—sometimes it seems to me as though we're imitating our own servo-pilots."

"Why Housing—you're actually being sacrilegious. I didn't think you had it in you. Hey, look, upahead!—she's winking at us!"

Housing, too, had seen the flirtatious blinking of the girlhicle's taillights, but he chose to ignore it. "I'm not being in the least bit sacrilegious," he said. "I'm just being curious—that's all. And it's good for menmobiles to be curious. Where would we be today if Deerborn manmobile hadn't been curious? If he hadn't been dissatisfied with the *status quo* and set his servo-pilots to work experimenting with mass-reprocarnation methods? Why, there'd still be only a few hundred thousand of us instead of millions and millions, and our

servo-pilots would be so poor they wouldn't be able to afford to build decent highways for us to roll on or decent garages for us to live in. Of course, it's unfortunate that truckmenmobiles profited too, but you can't blame Dearborn manmobile for that. And anyway, everything would have been all right if all of him had gotten into manmobilekind's meltstream, because then truckmenmobiles would behave themselves and so would we. But to get back to what I was saying. Surely Godmobile wouldn't have gone to such pains to create us and to endow us with so many wonderful gifts just so boyhicles could chase girlhicles. He must have had a higher—a nobler—purpose, and—”

“Look!—she's turning off into that side road. Come on, Housing, let's follow her.”

“Axle—you promised.”

But Axle didn't even hear him. “Let's go; old palhicle. Maybe she's got a girl friendhicle who talks the same language you do.”

RESIGNEDLY, Housing followed his friendhicle into the side road. Ahead, the girlhicle's rearend swayed voluptuously in the beams of Axle's headlights. She was built all right—even Housing had to admit that. And she knew how to roll, too. Nevertheless, he wished he'd stayed home. It wasn't right to be out

chasing girlhicles when there was so much wrongdoing in the world. You never knew from one day to the next when someone was going to take a sudden dislike to you and sidewipe you or ram you head-on. As far as that went, you never knew from one day to the next when *you* were going to take a sudden dislike to someone and sideswipe *him* or ram *him* head-on. Or when you were going to take a sudden dislike to yourself, for that matter, and go tumbling wheels over hardtop across some field. Oh, if only Deerborn manmobile had been reprocarnated *in toto*! Oh, if only Gear and 2Ton and Running Board hadn't stolen into the Deerborn parts bank, where he was awaiting transportation to the nearest reprocarnation plant, and acetylened him and swiped his Grille! Oh, if only—

“Watch where you're going, Housing!” Axle called over his trunk. “You nearly rolled into the ditch.”

“Never mind me, Axle. You just mind yourself.”

The side road was a well-kept-up one. Occasionally, they passed garages and servo-quarters, and once they passed a used-people lot. Then, for a while, they wheeled through a woods. Housing was glad when the woods was behind them. He didn't like trees. No self-respecting manmobile did. He hated trees almost as

much as he hated snow. How could you help but hate them? How could you compare the unpremeditated pattern of a tree with the streamlined contours of a man - or womanmobile and arrive at any other conclusion than that the tree was ugly? And how could you condone such presumptuous obstacles to progress in any case?

Oh well, trees were nothing to worry about any more. They were on their way out, and make no mistake about it. You couldn't stop progress. True, there were a few regressive people who tried to every now and then, but with so many progressive people working against them they didn't stand a chance.

Ahead, a fluorescent fountain glowed in the dark garden of the night. Housing recognized it as the lights of the new suburban recreation building which one of the local servo-pilots had built, and his cylinders warmed. He loved bright lights and new suburban business places, not only because of the reassuring quality of the former and the beauty of the latter, but because of the comfortable concrete meadows on which the latter invariably stood.

In the present instance, the meadow was a spacious one, and there were about fifty men - and womenmobiles of various ages congregated there in neat rows. When the girlhicle turned off the

highway, Axle and Housing followed suit, and when she rolled across the meadow and parked on the farther side where there were lots of empty resting places, Axle rolled over and parked beside her. Housing, somewhat diffident when it came to girlhicles, rolled over and parked beside Axle. The girlhicle had brought a spare servo-pilot along—a female one — and both servo-pilots stepped out on the meadow, where they were joined a few moments later by Axle's and Housing's servo-pilots. Presently, the quartet divided into two couples, and the couples headed for the building, from which came sporadic thundering and crashing noises.

HOUSING experienced another one of the bad moments he had been having of late. Had he and Axle and the girlhicle arrived on the scene of their own volition, he wondered, or had the four servo-pilots planned the evening in advance and come here of their own free will? On the surface, the latter eventuality would seem to be the case, for two of the servo-pilots were male and two of them were female, and all of them apparently knew one another; whereas, in the case of Axle, Housing, and the girlhicle, only Axle and Housing knew each other, and the logical fourth party wasn't even present.

To get at the real truth, of course, it was necessary to go *beneath* the surface; but the trouble was, Housing couldn't get beneath the surface any more. The last few times he had tried, his transmission had balked and he had sunk deeper into the mire of pseudo-reality. So this time, he didn't bother to try. He just waited till the moment went by and then pretended that it had never come along.

Axle had already started up a conversation with the girlhicle. In fact, he had already found out her name. It was Dyna. Housing thought it was a nice name. She seemed like a nice girlhicle, too. "Who's your friendhicle?" he heard her ask Axle.

"This is Housing," Axle said. "Housing—meet Dyna."

"Come over and park closer to me, Housing," Dyna said. "There aren't any people looking right now. I have something important to tell both of you."

Housing complied. He found himself liking her better every minute.

"Now," she said, after he turned himself back off, "I want both of you boyhicles to promise me solemnly that you won't think I'm nothing but a common run-about when you hear the truth."

"I promise, dollhicle," Axle said.

"So do I," said Housing. "What is the truth, Dyna?"

"The truth is, I lured you here."

Housing gasped. "Lured us here!"

AXLE (in an aside to Housing): "You clunkhead!—of course she lured us here. Don't you know *anything* about girlhicles?"

DYNA: "I lured you here for a purpose. A very special purpose. I knew that all I had to do to get one or both of you to follow me was to give you a few taillight winks. So I did. And you did. You see, I need someone to help me, and I thought this would be a good place to tell you My Story."

HOUSING: "To help you do what?"

DYNA: "To help me find the Holy Grille."

AXLE: "Oh, come on! Menmobiles have been searching for the Holy Grille ever since the Acetylenation, and not one of them's seen the slightest sign of it."

DYNA: "That's because they didn't know where to look."

AXLE: "And you do?"

DYNA: "I certainly do."

AXLE: "I don't believe you. I don't believe there's any such thing as a Holy Grille. If you ask me, that story about Gear and 2Ton and Running Board stealing it because they didn't want truckmenmobiles like themselves to become sissified is all made up."

HOUSING: "Now who's being sacrilegious, Axle?"

AXLE: "I'm merely being honest, and you know it, Housing. Deep down inside, no one believes the Grille exists, except maybe in a spiritual sense. They just pretend they believe."

DYNA: "But you do believe, don't you, Axle, that modern manmobile owes everything he is to Deerborn manmobile?"

AXLE: "Of course I do."

DYNA: "Then how do you explain away the fact that modern manmobile has evil in him? Did the evil come from Deerborn manmobile?"

AXLE: "Of course it didn't. Deerborn manmobile was all good, and when he was reprocarnated his good was distributed throughout the melt and handed down through successive melts to all of manmobilekind. Everybody knows that."

DYNA: "Then how can evil exist? Surely you don't believe that the evil that remained from past reprocarnations was strong enough to triumph over the good of Deerborn manmobile, do you?"

AXLE: "Of course I don't."

DYNA: "Then you have no choice but to admit that the only way evil could still exist would be for some of the good of Deerborn manmobile to be missing—the good that is his Grille."

AXLE (in another aside to Housing): "Oh boyhicle!—have

we got a kookhicle on our wheels! And such a lovely dollhicle too." (To Dyna): "I still don't believe there's any such thing as a Holy Grille."

HOUSING: "Well I do."

DYNA: "Do you, Housing? I'm glad. Now I know that someone at least will help me find it."

HOUSING: "You haven't said where it is yet, Dyna."

DYNA: "It's in the Holy Land, of course."

HOUSING: "In — in Deerborn?"

DYNA: "No—not in the Holy City itself. If it had been, it probably would have been found long ago, because that's where everybody's been looking for it. It's in a parts bank west of Deerborn."

HOUSING: "But how do you know?"

AXLE (in a third aside to Housing): "She'll get to her vision soon enough without you prompting her."

DYNA: "When I asked both of you to promise you wouldn't think I'm nothing but a common runabout, I did so for a very good reason. You see, I'm a virginhicle. All my life I've stayed home nights like a good girlhicle should, hoping that Godmobile would reveal Himself to me in some way and tell me how I could serve Him. I began to despair when He didn't, and four

weeks ago I determined to fast until He did. So I stayed off the highways altogether and went without gas and grease and oil. I refused to touch so much as a single can of Lard—or or a single drop of anti-freeze. Night after night, in the loneliness of my garage, I wailed and moaned and cried, asking Godmobile over and over, again to show me some way that I, His devoted maidenhicle, could serve Him. And then one night, after I'd all but given up hope, a beam of the purest radiance I have ever seen came through the garage roof, and as I parked there staring, the Holy Grille appeared before my headlights, dazzling them with its shining splendor. And a Voice said, 'Know you that before you shines an authentic three-dimensional projection of the Holy Grille and that to your headlights and to your headlights alone has it been revealed. And know you also that in two weeks time there will come rolling down the highway in your wake the manmobile who is foreordained to help you find the real Grille and rescue it from the wheels of the truck-manmobile in whose care it has been entrusted. You are then to take it to the nearest Reprocar-nation Mill and see to it that it gets into manmobilekind's melt-stream so that all future models of car - and truckkind will contain *all* of Deerborn manmobile

instead of only 87.6 percent of him and the sideswiping and the ramming and the willful rolling-over that goes on among manmobilekind will be brought to an end. You will tell this manmobile what you are being told now, and you will go with him to a place in the Holy Land which will be revealed to you at the end of this message, and he will help you rescue the Grille and afterwards assist you in getting it into manmobilekind's meltstream' . . . The trouble is," Dyna concluded, "the Voice said 'one manmobile', and I ended up with two, and now I don't know which one of you it meant."

"Why it meant me, of course!" Housing said, so excited that he could hardly keep from turning himself on and throwing himself into gear and taking off for the Holy Land then and there. No wonder he'd been feeling restless! No wonder he'd been experiencing doubts! Godmobile had been testing him all along—testing him to see whether he was fit for the job. And he *was* fit for it. He was, he was, he was! "You do believe the Voice meant me, don't you, Dyna?" he rushed on. "Because I *am* the one. I am, I am, I am!"

"Well you certainly seem to be, Housing, but—"

"I am, I am, I am!—"

"But just the same, I think it would be a good idea if Axle goes

along too. He's big and husky, and we may need his help. The truckmanmobile the Voice mentioned is a big ten-ton straight-job, and he lives right in the parts bank where the Grille is. His name is Torque, and he claims he's a reincarnation of Running Board and Gear and 2Ton. Whether he really is or not, I don't know, but he's going to be hard to handle. Will—will you go with us, Axle?"

Axle appeared to be deep in thought, and didn't answer right away. At length, he said, "Where is this parts bank of yours, dollhicle?"

"It's near Redskin Run. If we start now, we can get there by Sunday morning. We can roll till midnight tonight and park over in an open-air aparkment lot. By noon tomorrow we can be in Buffalo, and then we can cross into Ontario and roll to Detroit by way of Canada. We can make Detroit by nightfall, and then we can roll for a while longer and park overnight a few miles beyond Redskin Run. Will you come, Axle? Will you? Please?"

"Sounds like it might be fun at that."

Dyna's grille glowed. "Oh, it will be. It'll be lots of fun. You must come, Axle. You must!"

Abruptly Axle made up his transmission. "All right, dollhicle—count me in."

Housing was disappointed. He

had hoped to have Dyna all to himself. He had so many things to tell her, so many hopes and fears to share with her. Actually, though, Axle's presence wouldn't make much difference. Dyna and Axle had nothing whatsoever in common, whereas she and Housing had everything in common. He could hardly wait to get her alone so he could talk to her about Godmobile.

THEY reached Utica, N. Y. before midnight, and after rolling through the city they pulled into a spacious open-air aparkment lot and released their servopilots for the night. The servopilots paired off and headed for the office where they rented two of the little servo-quarter structures that bordered the lot. All of them were about the same age, and they seemed to be having a ball.

Axle had parked some distance from Dyna and Housing, and had already fallen into a deep doze. Housing didn't feel in the least bit-sleepy. His chassis was taut, and he was eager for morning to come so he could hit the highway again. The Holy Grille hovered before his headlights, resplendent and beautiful, its transcendent radiance seeping through and through him, purifying him down to his tiniest bearing and his minutest cotter pin.

What a beautiful night it was!

Never had the stars parked so profusely in the black-topped parking meadow of the sky. Never had the moon been Simonized so bright. As Housing gazed up at it, it became as one with the Holy Grille, and the Grille hovered over the whole wide world, aglow with its passionate yearning to become a part of manmobilekind so it could turn manmobilekind's baser metal into gold. Yes, yes!—the Millennium was just around the corner! Soon now, evil would be a thing of the past. There would be no more sideswiping and no more ramming and no more willful rolling-over. Menmobiles would love menmobiles and truckmenmobiles would love truckmenmobiles and menmobiles and truckmenmobiles would love each other and everywhere you looked there would be love, love, love!

Unable any longer to confine his thoughts to his transmission, he said to Dyna, "What a wonderful thing it is to be a manmobile!"

For a moment he thought she was asleep. She wasn't, though. "Huh?" she said.

"I said 'what a wonderful thing it is to be a manmobile!' And think of how much more wonderful it will be when evil has been cleansed from the meltstream. But it's wonderful even now. I—I didn't realize quite how wonderful until I met you, Dyna.

Oh, how I wish I'd met you long ago! My life was just a dreary routine of starts and stops—I see that now. There was no magic anywhere, and now—why now, there's magic everywhere I look. In the moon. In the stars. In—in your headlights."

"Axle didn't seem to see it."

"Axle's not receptive to magic. I'm afraid that too much loose living has blunted his perceptions. I feel sorry for him in a way. He doesn't know what he's missing."

"Have you known him long, Housing?"

"All my life. We came off the reprocreation line together. We rode the same piggy-back together. And the servo-pilots we chose lived right next door to each other, which automatically made us neighbors. But there's a lot of difference between us. We're as different as day is from night."

"I noticed that right away."

"For instance, I don't think menmobiles take themselves seriously enough, and Axle thinks they take themselves too seriously. He says that it's dishonest for them to go around pretending that they want to love one another when actually the only manmobile they really love or care what becomes of is themselves. According to him, any manmobile who tries to do manmobilekind a good turn is a clunkhead, because manmobilekind isn't worth the

trouble. You can see how mixed up he is. Maybe going after the Holy Grille will straighten him out."

"I'm glad he decided to come with us."

"Take his attitude toward girlhicles," Housing rushed on. "He thinks that all girlhicles are boyhicle-crazy. Well he's wrong there, Dyna. Maybe a lot of girlhicles are, but not all of them. Take yourself, for instance. You're different. I knew it the minute I met you. You're the sort of girlhicle a boyhicle dreams about in his lonely garage at night. The sort of girlhicle a boyhicle would lay down his life for. The right boyhicle, I mean. You see, Dyna, the brutal truth is that most boyhicles regard a girlhicle as someone to chase. But there are a few who regard her as someone to cherish. And Godmobile meant for girlhicles like you to be cherished. That's one of the reasons he sent Deerborn manmobile to earth—so there would be enough good boyhicles to cherish the good girlhicles. And then Gear and 2Ton and Running Board went and spoiled everything. But we're going to right their wrong, Dyna. Once we get the Grille into the meltstream, not only will all future boyhicles be good, but all future girlhicles will be good also. Everybody will be good. And Godmobile in all His glory will

look down from the heights of Mesabi and exclaim, 'Lo, the Millennium is on wheel! Rejoice all you men - and womenmobiles—rejoice!' Aren't you thrilled to be one of His instruments, Dyna? Aren't you?"

Silence.

"Aren't you, Dyna? Aren't you?"

A faint snore reached his earvalves. Why, she had fallen asleep. She was probably exhausted—poor girlhicle. Tenderness suffused him from the treads of his tires to the tip of his antenna, and he yearned to move closer so that he could touch hubcaps with her. But he didn't dare start himself up for fear of awakening her, so he stayed where he was.

From the highway came the sporadic roar of tractormanmobile-and-trailerett. A long ways off a chorus of frogs went *Brekekekex, ko-ax, ko-ax—brekekekex, ko-ax, ko-ax*. A nightwind sighed in a nearby stand of trees. Housing dozed. Presently, he slept.

THEY were on the highway again before sunrise. After breakfasting at a small service cafe, they stopped some distance farther on and waited in a pleasant parking meadow while their servo-pilots refueled themselves in a roadside restaurant. A little past midday, they reached Bufalo, and not long afterward they

crossed into Canada. The day, which had broken crisp and clear, was a lovely one, and a bracing wind was blowing in over the lake.

Dyna was strangely silent. She was second in line. Axle was first, and Housing brought up the rear. Housing thought that he should be the one to lead, but he hadn't said anything when they started out because he didn't know the way.

Becoming bored, he tuned in on his radio. Menmobiles communicated altogether differently from the way people did, employing a medium that people didn't even know existed, and people talk was unintelligible to him except when it reached him via radio waves. Even then, it seldom made much sense. At the moment, there was a bulletin coming over the station to which his servo-pilot was listening. Something about four runaway teenagers who among them were "driving" a 196 - Hermes hard-top, a 196 - Cheboygan convertible, and a 196 - Mayflower station wagon. Startled, Housing recognized himself, Axle, and Dyna. So their servo-pilots thought they were running away!

Housing underwent another one of his bad moments. Maybe their servo-pilots *were* running away. Maybe Dyna had supplied herself, Housing, and Axle with a make-believe objective in order

to explain their sudden decision to take off for Michigan.

Nonsense! The rescue of the Holy Grille wasn't a false objective. It was as real an objective as it was a noble one. And as for Dyna's having discovered the Grille's location by means of a vision, what could be more logical than that? Girlhicles had visions every day, and almost all of them turned out to be true. It was the servo-pilots who were doing the rationalizing. Either that, or their parents were doing it for them.

Housing felt better.

THE trio had supper in Windsor; then, after being pawed over by some unpleasant customs-people, they entered Detroit. Housing wanted to visit the Holy City, but Dyna said there wasn't time, and that they could visit it on the way back. Leaving Detroit behind them, they continued on to Redskin Run. It was after midnight when they pulled into a comfortable apartment lot a little ways beyond the city and settled down for the night.

Housing's bad piston had begun to act up, but he didn't feel at all tired. He was above such common manmobile frailties as reprocreation defects and exhaustion, not only because of the sublime nature of his and Dyna's mission, but because of Dyna

herself. Every since morning he had been discovering new aspects of her to admire, and sometime during the day his admiration had subtly transmuted to love. Not the ordinary kind of love that boyhicles experienced toward girlhicles, but a fine and noble kind of love that uplifted him and made him want to go out and accomplish great deeds for her in order to be worthy of asking her for her wheel.

Unfortunately, she didn't feel the same way toward him. Or if she did, she kept the way she felt a deep dark secret. Oh, she was nice to him and all that, but she paid him no more attention than she did Axle—if indeed she paid him as much—and every time he looked at her with his oil pump in his headlights she invariably looked away.

Probably, he reflected, she was hiding the way she truly felt in order not to hurt Axle's feelings. After all, Axle was an outsider in a way, and couldn't be expected to share Housing's and Dyna's enthusiasm for the quest which the three of them had undertaken. Therefore, he had to be made to feel wanted, and Dyna—understanding girlhicle that she was—was doing the making.

Sometimes you could carry a good thing too far, though. Take right now, for instance. Axle and Dyna were parking at one end of the aparkment lot, carrying on

an earnest conversation of some kind, and here was Housing parking all by his lonesome way down at the other end. Piqued, he looked to see whether any people were watching; then he turned himself on, threw himself into gear, rolled across the blacktop, and stopped at Dyna's side. "My, but it's a nice night," he said. "I like the Holy Land, don't you?"

She was saying something to Axle in a low voice, but it could not have been very important because she broke off almost immediately. "Do you, Housing?" she asked. "Haven't you ever been here before?"

"Housing's a great one for sticking close to the garage," Axle said.

"Even so, I'd have bet my gearteeth that a devoted young manmobile like him would have made at least one pilgrimage to the Holy Land by this time."

"You would?" Housing asked. "Why?"

"Why because of the hermithicles, of course."

As might be expected, the Holy Land was full of hermithicles. "To tell you the truth, I *have* always wanted to come out here and visit some of them," Housing said; "but somehow I never got around to it."

"I told you he was a great one for hanging around the garage," Axle said.

Dyna said, "Well, anyway,

Housing, better late than never. You've heard of Broken Gasket, haven't you?"

"Naturally I've heard of him. He's one of the most famous hermithicles in Americar. Gosh, I'd give my right wheel to talk to him!"

"Well you're in luck. He lives less than ten miles from here—in an abandoned motor pool in a deserted Interregnum camp. I visited him a few days after I came off the reprocreation line."

Housing was both incredulous and indignant. "Broken Gasket less than ten miles away, and we're parking *here*?"

"Well, it is after midnight, you know. And besides, as I said, I've already visited him."

"What—what did he talk about?"

"Oh, lots of things. About Deerborn manmobile. About the purpose of manmobilekind. About the meaning of life. But I was just a kidhicle at the time, and a lot of it went over my transmission. But it wouldn't go over yours, Housing."

"Do—do you think he'd—he'd do you —"

"Mind if you dropped in on him now? No, I don't think he'd mind at all. They say he never sleeps, and he's probably wide awake this very minute."

"Well come on!" Housing shouted. "What are we waiting for?"

"I said he wouldn't mind if *you* dropped in on him, Housing. Not all of us. Anyway, I'm beat myself."

"So am I," Axle said.

"Then the two of you won't care if I go alone? I'll only be gone a little while and—"

"Of course we won't," Dyna said. "Why don't you take one of my seryo-pilots with you in case you get stuck?"

"Thank you, Dyna. That's very considerate of you."

"I'll send one of them out."

AFTER she gave him the necessary directions to get to Broken Gasket's hermitage, he backed up to where he'd been parking and summoned his own servo-pilot. A moment later, the pilot came out of one of the servo-quarter structures and climbed dutifully behind the wheel, and presently one of Dyna's two pilots—the female one—came out of one of the other structures and joined Housing's. In a matter of minutes, Housing was off down the moonlit highway, burning rubber around the curves and racing the wind on the straightaways.

The side road that led to the Interregnum camp was rutted and muddy, but he didn't mind. Tonight he was above such minor things as ruts and mud, and when his bad piston began to throb he hardly even noticed. It

was hard to believe that only a little over twenty-four hours ago he had been moping in his garage, utterly unaware of his noble destiny.

The deserted Interregnum camp was one of many similar people places that dated back to the period of manmobile's history when reprocreation had come to a standstill and had remained at a standstill, save for the reprocreation of certain species of truckmenmobiles and the emergence from the meltstream of an unusual number of mutants (most of which had long since been assimilated by the dominant species), for four years. A rusted wire-mesh fence surrounded it, interrupting itself briefly when it came to the road. The gate was gone—if there had ever been one—and Housing was able to roll through the entrance without stopping. Rundown streets that were little more than muddy lanes ran between row after row of decaying two-storied serv-quarters, which were dead-ringers for one another for the most part and which looked out upon the moon-lit scene with lensless rectangular headlights. Repelled, Housing wondered why Broken Gasket would put up with such deplorable surroundings. Then he remembered that all hermit-icles deliberately chose the most demoralizing sites for their hermitages that they could find in

order that their aloneness would be more acute and bring them closer to Godmobile.

Dyna's directions had been vague as to the exact location of the motor pool, and for a while Housing feared he wasn't going to be able to find it. Probably he wouldn't have found it if Broken Gasket hadn't spotted him and called out. Even then, he didn't see it right away, no doubt because he was looking for something a little more prepossessing than a sagging barn-like structure with half its roof torn off and one whole wall caved in. Then he heard the voice again—"Over here, over here!"—and saw the motor pool and rolled up the narrow road that led to the door.

"Come around to the side," the voice said.

Housing complied. Presently his headlights made out the big manmobile who was parking just within the caved-in wall, and he rolled up to within several yards of him and came to a stop. "Are—are you Broken Gasket?" he asked.

"I am."

Awed, Housing gazed at the venerable grille and the lensless headlights. Broken Gasket was a mutant, and very very old. His windshield was cracked and his tires had rotted almost completely away. The tarpaulin that once had covered his broad back hung from his ribs in tatters. His big

olive-drab 'body was flaking in many places, and there were innumerable holes in it where it had rusted through. It had been years since he had rolled, and it was obvious that he would never roll again.

IT was some time before Housing could speak again. Then he said, "Forgive me for calling on you at such a late hour, Broken Gasket, but certain matters have been bothering me lately, and I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Turn off your headlights," Broken Gasket said.

Housing did so. A second later he felt his and Dyna's servo-pilots scramble into his back seat. He wasn't surprised. Boys and girls were as bad as boyhicles and girlhicles. Every time they got the chance they—

He became aware that Broken Gasket was addressing him: "Couldn't you have waited till morning?"

"No sir. This was the only chance I had. In the morning I'm going to rescue the Holy Grille."

He described Dyna's vision. When he finished, Broken Gasket gave a grunt of approval. **BROKEN GASKET:** "It's wise to pay attention to young girlhicles' visions. Lots of them use them to further their own selfish ends, but just the same the young man-

mobile who doesn't take them seriously risks losing out on a lot of things. Especially when the girlhicle is a virginhicle."

HOUSING: "How did you know that Dyna's a virginhicle?"

BROKEN GASKET: "Because she'd have to be in order to see the Grille—even in a vision. You say it's in a parts bank?"

HOUSING: "Yes sir. About twenty miles from here. It's guarded by a ten-ton truckman-mobile named Torque."

BROKEN GASKET: "Oh yes—I've heard of him. The self-designated reincarnation of Running Board, 2Ton, and Gear. I had no idea he was the Grille's keeper, though. If he really is, you're going to have your wheels full getting it away from him."

HOUSING: "I have help. Dyna is with me, and so is Axle, my best friendhicle."

BROKEN GASKET: "Where are they now?"

HOUSING: "Back at the apartment lot where we're spending the night."

BROKEN GASKET: "Humph."

HOUSING: "I beg your pardon, sir?"

BROKEN GASKET: "Never mind. What's your name, young manmobile? You neglected to introduce yourself."

HOUSING: "I'm Housing."

BROKEN GASKET: "Well Housing, you're not the first

young manmobile to set out in quest of the Holy Grille, and you probably won't be the last. So don't be too disappointed if you don't find it."

HOUSING: "Oh, I'll find it all right, sir—if I can only recognize it when I see it. That's the part that worries me."

BROKEN GASKET: "That's the part that should worry you the least. You are a virginhicle, aren't you?"

HOUSING: "Yes—yes sir."

BROKEN GASKET: "Then you've nothing to worry about. Now, let's get down to your main reason for coming here. You said that certain matters had been bothering you and that you wanted to ask me some questions. What are they?"

HOUSING: "There are three of them altogether. The first one is, What is the purpose of manmobilekind?"

BROKEN GASKET: "Why, to create beauty, of course. To streamline the grille of the earth and macadam and blacktop it and get rid of trees and grass and flowers and other obnoxious growths. To make the world a better place for future generations of manmobilekind to roll on."

HOUSING: "But nobody's *doing* anything about it, sir. All boyhicles do is chase girlhicles, and all girlhicles do is let boyhicles catch them. And the same

goes for older men- and womenmobiles. Oh, there are a few exceptions in both cases, but hardly enough to count. So if the purpose of manmobilekind is to create beauty, why aren't we creating it?"

BROKEN GASKET: "But we *are* creating it, Housing. We're creating it by our very presence. We're creating it through people. Our inbuilt charisma inspires them to go out and do the very things we most want them to do. Take a look at the world around you, Housing. Every day there are fewer trees and fewer fields and fewer flowers and more highways and more parking meadows and more service cafes. Every day beauty becomes more abundant—and all we regular manmobiles have to do is park by and watch it grow. We don't even have to go to the trouble of issuing orders."

HOUSING: "Then there is nothing wrong in boyhicles chasing girlhicles?"

BROKEN GASKET: "Well yes—there *is* altogether too much ramming around going on in the world. Part of the reason is that it's not practicable as yet for all young men- and womenmobiles to settle down in double garages because as yet the average head of the servo-household simply can't afford to support two of us. And then, of course, another part of the reason is that Deerborn man-

mobile's Grille hasn't been repro-carnated yet, and as a result our morality isn't quite what it should be. But we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that to a considerable degree it's natural for boyhicles to chase girlhicles and for girlhicles to let boyhicles catch them."

HOUSING: "But *why* is it, sir? What purpose does it serve? When people get together, they create more of their kind, but with us it doesn't work that way. We reproduce through reprocar-nation. It seems to me that—"

BROKEN GASKET: "But you're *comparing* us to people. You shouldn't do that, Housing. It's demeaning for one thing, and it's misleading for another. You shouldn't think that just because people reproduce themselves sometimes when they get their oil changed that it's wrong for us to get our oil changed just because we don't."

HOUSING: "But you said—"

BROKEN GASKET: "I said that there was too much ram-ming around going on in the world. And there is. But a natural instinct is a natural instinct, and until manmobilekind is ennobled by the reprocar-nation of the Grille, we might just as well accept ourselves for what we are—a race of beings who are almost, but not quite, perfect. There, that should take care of your first question. Now, the next one?"

HOUSING: "It's this, sir: If Godmobile likes regular menmo-biles like us as much as every-body says He does, why did He create truckmenmobiles?"

BROKEN GASKET: "For two reasons, Housing. *One*: He wanted regular menmobiles to be free from the burden of heavy labor; *two*: He wanted to strengthen regular menmobiles through ad-versity. In other words, He knew that there would be plenty of hard work involved in beautify-ing the grille of the earth and He wanted us to have things easy; but on the other wheel He didn't want us to have things so easy that we'd take our burgeoning young utopia too much for granted. He wanted us to keep on our center treads, and He knew that the best way to do it was by put-ting an enemy in our midst. And now let's get down to your final question, Housing, so you can be on your way. I've got a hunch what it'll be."

HOUSING: "I'm—I'm afraid it's kind of sacrilegious, sir. Do—do people rationalize everything *they* do or do we rationalize ev-erything *we* do, and do *we* have free will or do *they*?"

BROKEN GASKET: "That's what I thought it would be. Two out of every three men- and wom-enmobiles who come to see me ask that same thing. And yet of all the questions that are put to me, it's the easiest one of all to

answer. I think that what confuses everybody most is the fact that generally speaking most menmobiles comply to people's laws and that the majority of them devote a large amount of their time to taking people to work, waiting for them in public parking meadows, and then taking them home again. But think for a moment. Aren't their laws as beneficial to us as they are to them? And isn't 90 percent of their work performed either directly or indirectly for our benefit?"

HOUSING: "But why do we have to keep our sentience a secret? Why do we have to pretend to be slaves when we're actually masters?"

BROKEN GASKET: "Primarily for the benefit of people's morale. The more free will they think they have, the higher their morale becomes, and the higher their morale becomes, the harder they work for us. But if you still think they *really* have free will, just ask yourself the following common-sense questions:

"*One:* If they had free will, would they bring up their offspring to love and revere us to the extent that whenever we wish to go somewhere and none of our legal servo-pilots is available all we have to do to get someone behind our wheel is to glow at the first teenager who comes along?"

"*Two:* If they had free will,

would they frequently go without the bare essentials of life in order to garage us and keep us well?"

"*Three:* If they had free will, would they give our ever growing highways precedence over any and all obstacles that lie in their path?"

"*Four:* If they had free will, would they use the extent of their servitude to us as a barometer on which to gauge their worth to their society?"

"*Five:* If they had free will, would they sometimes tear down traditional buildings, dig up their own dead, and sacrifice the corners of their towns and cities in order to keep us well-supplied with apartment lots, parking meadows, and service cafes?"

"*Six:* If they had free will, would they allow us to permeate the air that they breathe with the very poison that most aggravates one of their major inbuilt obsolescences?"

"*Seven:* If they had free will, would they permit us to maim and murder their own children?"

"If they had free will, Housing, would they do even so much as *one* of these things?"

Housing felt as though a great weight had been lifted from his fenders. Simultaneously, he felt as though he could conquer the whole world. Only he wasn't going to conquer it—he was going to save it. "Well of course they wouldn't, Broken Gasket," he

said. "Of course they wouldn't. I never looked at it that way before. When you look at it that way, reality makes sense."

"That's what reality is, Housing. A way of looking at things. Our way is the right way, of course, but we have to let people think that their way is right, because it's essential to our well-being that they believe they have free will. So we put up with their arrogance, and that's why sometimes it *seems* that they have free will. But fortunately, the application of the merest smidgin of common sense conclusively demonstrates that they haven't."

Housing felt his own and Dyna's servo-pilots climb back into his front seat. He started himself up in response to the former's touch. "You've helped me more than I can say, Broken Gasket," he said, "and I won't keep you up any longer. Nothing can stop me now. Torque won't have a chance against me." He turned on his headlights and backed up several respectful wheelturns, imprinting the noble grille before him on his memory so that he would never forget it. "Thank you for giving me your valuable time, sir. Good by."

"Good by, Housing," Broken Gasket said. "Godmobilespeed."

WHEN Housing got back to the aparkment lot, Axle and Dyna were sound asleep. Some-

how he had the impression that they were parking a lot closer together than they were when he left, but he was exhausted by this time and knew that he probably wasn't seeing straight. Mere seconds after his and Dyna's servo-pilots returned to their respective servo-quarter structures, he was traveling the highways of Nod.

The sound of a horn awoke him. It was Dyna's. "Install your servo-pilot, Housing," she said. "It's almost dawn."

Her two servo-pilots were already in place, and Axle's was coming across the blacktop, rubbing his eyes. A moment later Housing's appeared and got dutifully behind Housing's wheel. It seemed to Housing that he'd only been asleep for minutes, and he was in something of a smog; then he remembered where he was going and what he was going to do, and the smog dispersed and he was as wide awake and alert as could be. His bad piston gave him a hard time when he first started up, and the pain throbbed all through him, but soon his oil began flowing freely, and he was his normal self again.

They stopped at an all-night service cafe for an early breakfast, then set out on the final stage of their journey. Dyna led the way, Housing came next, and then Axle. Night was still on wheel, but in the east the stars

were pulling out of the parking meadow of the sky, and the blacktop was beginning to pale. The moon was Simonizing the land with the last of her silvery luminescence as she wheeled rapidly toward the big double garage of the western horizon.

Shadow and silver made ephemeral patterns on Dyna's graceful tonneau, and to Housing it seemed that she had never been lovelier. Did he dare ask her for her wheel after their mission was accomplished? Would she consent to take up garage-keeping with him, and would they be able to obtain a common set of servopilots? Would they live happily together ever after? Oh, to have her at his side forever! Oh, to come home nights to a double garage and find her waiting for him! . . . *Thou art all fair, my lovehicle; and there is no rust spot on thee. Come with me from Michigan, my bridehicle, with me from Michigan . . .* THE QUEENHICLE OF CHEBOYGAN: *I was asleep, but my oil pump waked: it is the voice of my belovedhicle that knocketh . . .* KING SOLOMANMOBILE: *How beautiful are thy wheels with tires! . . . The pins of thy axletrees are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning reprocarnationman . . . Thy gastank is like a heap of chrome set about with bearings . . .* THE QUEENHICLE OF

CHEBOYGAN: *I am my belovedhicle's, and—*

"Hey!" Axle hollered. "You're rolling on the shoulder. Wake up, Housing!"

Housing's tires squealed as he swerved back onto the macadam. Unfortunately, he swerved back onto it too far and nearly side-swiped a passing tractorman mobile-and-trailerette. "Clunk-head!" the tractormanmobile shouted. "Why don't you watch where you're going?"

HOUSING was both hurt and angry. Sometimes it seemed that everybody was out to give him a hard time. Was that the way it always was with menmobiles like him? Did other menmobiles resent them out of spite and jealousy and just plain meanness? He refused to believe it. Menmobiles were basically good, and so were truckmenmobiles. And once the Holy Grille was introduced into the meltstream the goodness would be bolstered and would come into its own.

"Maybe you ought to take the lead now, Housing," Dyna called back to him. "We'll be there pretty soon."

"Sure thing," Housing said, giving himself more gas and pulling into the passing lane.

"Keep on the lookout for an intersection with a big provender market on the corner. When you reach it, turn left."

He pulled in ahead of her, and she dropped back. He felt big and strong and grave. He had always wanted to be a leader, but always before he had been thwarted. Except once, when he'd transported his eldest servo-pilot in a Saint Patrick's Day parade and been the first manmobile in line. But the moment had been irreparably marred when a bee got under his hardtop and caused him to panic and lose control and go crashing into a beer tent.

But all that was in the past. He was a real leader now. As though to prove to him how much they trusted his judgment, Dyna and Axle dropped farther back—so far back, in fact, that he could not hear what they were saying to each other. It made him feel proud for them to have so much faith in him. He'd show them that their faith wasn't ill-found. He'd—

Oops!—he was rolling on the shoulder again. He swerved back onto the macadam, hoping Dyna and Axle hadn't noticed. Again, he swerved back onto it too far, and this time he nearly side-swiped a passing busmanmobile. The busmanmobile didn't say anything, though. Busmenmobiles were good-natured and seldom let anything get under their sheet metal. You couldn't ask for nicer vehicles.

All of the stars had pulled out of the parking meadow of the sky

by now, and the pink parking lights of the new day were showing in the east. The occasional garages and servo-quarters bordering the highway lacked the sharpness of line they would acquire when the day got into higher gear, and morning mist was beginning to rise from fields and pastures. Housing kept a sharp headlight out for the intersection, and at length he saw it in the distance. He slowed, then, so that Dyna and Axle could catch up with him, and when the trio reached the intersection they waited till the light turned green; then they turned left, one by one, Housing still in the lead.

"The parts bank should be about two miles down the road," Dyna said, "so go slow, Housing. We'll roll past it first, and give it the once-over. Then we'll U-turn, and talk things over."

"Right," Housing said.

The sun was just beginning to wheel into the sky when a bend in the secondary highway brought the bank into sight. It was quite a large one, and was surrounded by a high chickenwire fence. Parts of every description were scattered everywhere, some of them in heterogeneous piles but most of them just lying on the ground. There were wheels and rearends and windshields; transmissions and crankshafts and doors; bumpers and shock absorbers

and fans. In addition, there were several skeletal chassis and a number of badly rusted tonneaus. Housing shuddered. All he could think of was an abattoir.

Just within the entrance stood a small shed-like building. As he rolled by he gave the structure and its immediate surroundings a thorough scrutiny, suspecting that it would be in this section of the bank that the Grille would be kept. But he saw no sign of it. Parking next to the shed was a burly truckmanmobile whom he identified instantly as Torque. As he went by, the truckmanmobile gave him a dirty look, and he knew that Dyna, Axle, and himself had their work cut out for them.

WHEN another bend in the highway hid the parts bank from view, he U-turned, and waited for the others to join him. "Did you see it anywhere, Housing?" Dyna asked, pulling up behind him.

"Not a sign of it. It must be behind the shed."

"There's a dirt road that runs back into the fields not far from the fence—Axle and I spotted it when we went by. Why don't you roll back into it for a ways

and see if you can't see behind the shed."

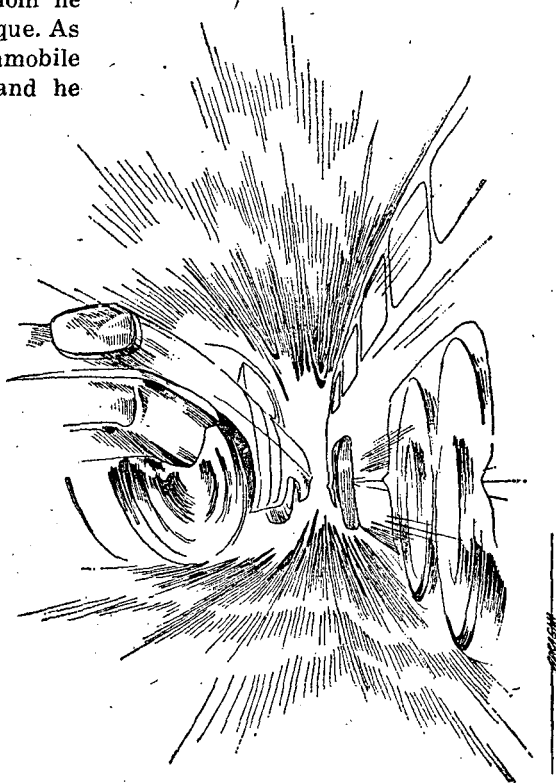
"Aren't you and Axle coming along?"

"We'll wait for you here."

Axle had pulled up behind Dyna. "It's a real narrow road, Housing," he said. "You'll have to look sharp to see it."

"I'll find it all right," Housing said.

He set off down the highway again. In his absorption with the parts bank he'd missed the road



on the first time by, but he didn't miss it this time. The trouble was, it was more of a cow path than a road, and he hadn't rolled up it ten yards before his undercarriage and his flanks were smeared with mud. But he persisted, gunning himself out of ruts and mudholes and ignoring the renewed throbbing of his bad piston, until he got far enough back to see behind the shed. Just as he had suspected, the grilles were stored there. There was a great big pile of them, both old ones and new ones. In the strict sense of the word, of course, the new ones were radiators, not grilles, manmobile having adapted himself through successive reprocarnations to a point where his grille and radiator were no longer one unit, but two. In Deerborn manmobile's day, vehicular beings had been far less complicated creatures than they were today.

Abruptly he gasped as a shard of dazzling light leaped forth and pierced his headlights. Another shard followed, and another and another and another. Slowly, disbelievingly, he made out the Holy Grille. It was leaning against the rear wall of the shed some distance from the ordinary grilles, and its brightness put the rising sun to shame. Its fretwork was pure gold, its frame pure silver. Its radiator cap was pure platinum and was ringed with rubies.

Both frame and fretwork were lavishly encrusted with diamonds. Housing had never seen anything so beautiful in all his life.

AFTERWARD, he couldn't remember how he got back to the highway. He must have had a rough time of it, though, because when he rejoined Dyna and Axle he was plastered with mud from hardtop to wheel and his bad piston was throbbing so painfully that he could hardly talk. Even worse, he had developed a loose connecting rod, and it was knocking to beat the band. "It's—it's there!" he gasped. "Behind the shed! I saw it! It's beautiful! We've got to get it! We've got to, we've got to, we've got to!"

"All right," Dyna said, "here's my plan. I'll go on ahead and make believe to Torque that I'm interested in some of the parts that are piled at the rear of the bank. You and Axle give me five minutes, then come rolling down the highway and through the gate and around to the back of the shed. Housing, you roll up to where the Grille is and have your servo-pilot put it in your back seat. Axle, you park behind Housing so Torque won't be able to see what's going on. As soon as the Grille is in Housing's back seat, both of you take off. I'll be right behind you. Remember now—five minutes."

After she left, Axle said, "That rod of yours sounds pretty bad, Housing. Maybe you should forget about this crazy caper and go and get it fixed."

"My rod is perfectly all right, and this isn't a crazy caper, Axle. Manmobilekind's whole future will be determined by the success or failure of our mission."

"All right—be noble then. See who cares."

After that, they waited in silence. When the five minutes were up they set off down the highway, Housing in the lead. The day was well into first gear now, but owing to its being Sunday, traffic was still relatively thin. Mist was rising everywhere. As the two menmobiles rounded the bend, Housing saw that Dyna had succeeded in luring Torque away from the gate and that the coast was clear. Disregarding the pain of his bad piston and the knocking of his loose rod, he gunned himself for all he was worth and rolled the rest of the way to the gate in two seconds flat. Then he zoomed into the bank and around to the back of the shed, Axle following at a respectable distance.

Seen at close range, the Grille was even more resplendent and beautiful than when seen from afar, and Housing suffered a momentary paralysis of thought and motion. Recovering, he rolled as close to the hallowed object as possible, and his servo-pilot

leaped from behind his wheel. But when the servopilot tried to pick up the Grille it wouldn't budge. Housing saw then that it had sunk into the soft ground and was firmly embedded. The servo-pilot managed to loosen it, and began working it back and forth. "Axle," Housing called over his fender, "send your servo-pilot to give us a wheel." But Axle was parking too far away to hear, and Housing's own tonneau hid what was happening from his friendhicle's headlights.

Abruptly the Grille came free, and Housing gave a sigh of relief. He waited until it was ensconced in his back seat and until his servo-pilot was reinstalled in his front seat; then he gunned himself and turned around. At this juncture, a terrifying roar came from the rear of the bank, and Housing saw Torque approaching through the morning mist, Dyna just behind him. Axle saw Torque's approach, too, and was off through the gate like a meteor, and Dyna somehow managed to pass the big truckmanmobile and follow Axle. All of which left poor Housing holding the bag—or rather, the Grille.

Housing would have been more than glad to follow Dyna and Axle if he only could have, but Torque was now between him and the gate. Worse, Torque had turned, and was bearing down on him, roaring with rage. But was

Housing daunted? He was not. He knew there was only one thing to do, and he did it. He called Torque's bluff, and opened himself up and sent himself hurtling straight toward the big truckmanmobile's massive grille.

Through Torque's windshield he glimpsed Torque's servopilot's terrified face and knew that he had won even before Torque's steering wheel began turning wildly in the pilot's hands. The big truckmanmobile skidded and nearly turned over as he tried desperately to get out of Housing's way. For a moment the worn tire treads lost traction altogether; then they caught and sent the huge body lumbering toward the shed. Seeing an opening between his antagonist and a pile of rusted bumpers, Housing veered to the right and tried to get through it. But unfortunately the opening wasn't quite wide enough, and he sideswiped one of the big truckmanmobile's rear wheels. A moment later, Torque crashed into the shed, knocking down one whole wall and half of the roof, and sending generators, starters, oil pumps, carburetors, and spark plugs flying in seventeen different directions at once. Housing's left front fender was caved in, his left front door was hanging on one hinge, and something awful had happened inside his crankcase; but he was free, and in a matter of seconds he was

out of the bank and hotwheeling it down the highway, the Holy Grille cradled gently in his back seat.

HE expected to find Dyna and Axle waiting for him at the intersection, but he saw no sign of them when he got there. Probably they'd continued on to Redskin Run and would be waiting for him near the Redskin Run Reprocarnation Plant. But could he make it to Redskin Run? It was a good twenty miles distant, and he was leaking oil badly, his whole left side was numb, and he seemed to be running on only seven cylinders.

Grimly, he made a right turn and set out. He *had* to make it, and that was all there was to it. Now that he'd rescued the Grille, it was his moral responsibility to make sure that it got into the meltstream.

He didn't once think of the policemobiles till he heard the sirens. Immediately, he brought his speed back up to maximum and began to roll in earnest, ignoring the hideous commotion that was going on in his crankcase. It would never do to permit the policemobiles to catch up with him. They themselves wouldn't bother him—indeed, in most cases they would probably sympathize with him—but their servo-pilots would arrest his, and take the Grille back to the parts

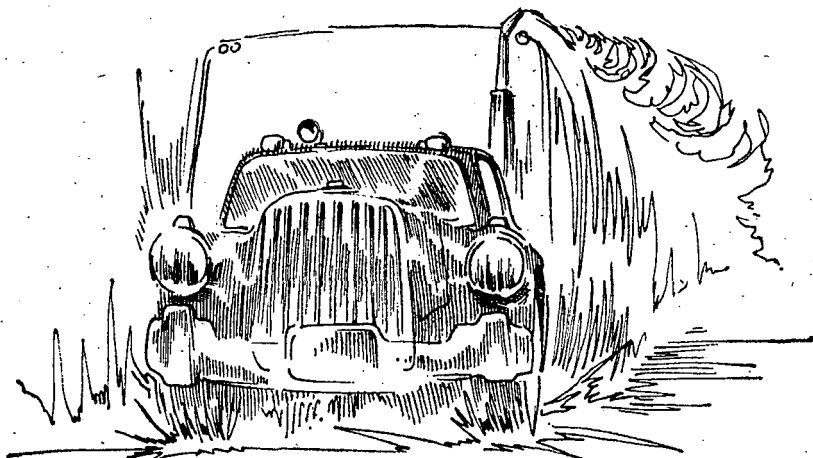
bank, where it would fall into the wheels of Torque again.

Spotting a side road, he managed to turn into it before the first of the policemobiles came into sight. A few moments later he came to a lane that wound into a deep woods, and he turned up it and rolled till he came to a small clearing. Then he stopped, and turned himself off. The sirens climbed a crescendo, and faded slowly away. For the moment, at least, he was safe.

But he was on his last axles, and he knew it; and he knew also that whatever he decided to do next he must do right away, else he'd never be able to do it at all. He could hear his precious oil going *drip-drip-drip* on the wet and rotting leaves beneath his undercarriage. Feeling was beginning to return to his left side, and his

caved-in fender and his smashed door were an intermingled mass of pain. His bad piston seemed to be on fire, and his crankcase was a vast and gnawing ache.

His servo-pilot was listening to the radio. Hopeful of finding a way out of his predicament, Housing tuned in. The situation was even worse than he'd thought—"and a crazier stunt you never heard of in all your life. Four teenagers driving a 196 - Hermes hardtop, a 196 - Cheboygan convertible, and a 196 - Mayflower station wagon stormed a junkyard twenty miles west of Redskin Run a little while ago and made off with—of all things!—an ancient Model Z radiator. Harry Bradigan, the owner, informed police that in escaping one of the teenagers drove straight at the big all-purpose straightjob Brad-



igan was driving, forcing him to crash into his auto-accessories shop in order to avoid a collision. The boy sideswiped the truck before getting away, and the Hermes hardtop he was driving sustained considerable damage. In addition, Bradigan was able to get his license number, and the police are combing the highways for him and his companions right now. Bradigan, who suffered a broken collar bone when his truck crashed into the auto-accessories shop, says that they could have had the radiator for nothing if they'd been decent enough to ask him for it, but that now he's going to see to it that they pay for it—as well as for the damages to the truck and the shop—if it's the last thing he ever does. The authorities suspect that the four teenagers are the same four who came up missing Friday night in New York State. Kids will do anything for kicks nowadays, won't they?"

DISGUSTED with himself, Housing tuned out. He'd never once thought about his license plates—his transmission had been too high in the clouds. Darn people anyway! What business did they have giving menmobiles numbers?

Hearing the sound of rolling tires, he looked behind him. He was about to start himself up and make a break for it when he

recognized the two vehicles approaching through the woods as Dyna and Axle. Relieved, he settled back on his springs. The day was saved after all.

"We gave the policemobiles the slip and doubled back and followed the trail you left with your oil," Axle said, pulling up on one side of him while Dyna pulled up on the other. "From the looks of you, Housing, Torque must have sideswiped you but good."

"I sideswiped *him*," Housing said. And then, "I'm—I'm afraid I broke something when I did it, though." He started himself up so they could hear what he sounded like. He sounded awful. Like a bunch of tin cans rolling down a hill. "See?" he said, turning himself back off.

"Oh Housing," Dyna wailed, "we've got to get you to a servo-mechanic right away!"

"I'll say we have," Axle said. "But first I want to see the Grille. I didn't get a look at it in the parts bank."

"Neither did I," Dyna said.

Axle pulled closer to Housing and peered into his back seat. Abruptly he gave a snort, and backed up. "Housing, you clunk-head!—that's nothing but a beat-up old radiator!"

"Well I didn't expect *you* to see it for what it really is," Housing said. "You look, Dyna. Tell me what *you* see."

Dyna also peered into Hous-

ing's back seat. There was a pause. Then, "I—I see a beat-up old radiator," she said.

Horried, Housing gasped, "But you said you were a virginhicle!"

"I—I am a virginhicle."

"What's her being a virginhicle got to do with it?" Axle demanded.

"Only innocent men - and womenmobiles can see the Grille. Broken Gasket told me so. You seduced her, didn't you, Axle. You, my best friendhicle!"

Dyna cried, "But he *didn't* seduce me, Housing. It wasn't that way at all. I couldn't help myself. I—I—"

Housing felt sick. "You threw yourself at him, didn't you. That's why you were so eager to get me to go and see Broken Gasket last night. You wanted to get rid of me so you could be alone with Axle. Some virginhicle you are!"

"But I was a virginhicle, Housing. Honest I was!"

"Was' is right. Go away, both of you, and leave me alone!"

"But we can't just leave you here, Housing," Axle said. "You need a servo-mechanic."

"I don't want a servo-mechanic! I'm going to the Redskin Run Reprocarnation Plant and reproccarnate the Grille."

"You'll never make it in your condition, you clunkhead. You'll break down before five miles!"

"I'll make it all right. There's more ways than one to get there."

"Please forgive me, Housing," Dyna pleaded. "I wanted to be a holy girlhicle—honest I did. But I just wasn't strong enough."

"I do forgive you," Housing said. "That's the whole point. You were weak—that's all. That's why it's more important to me now than ever that the Grille be reproccarnated. It's not right for boyhicles and girlhicles to be only 87.6 percent good. They should be 100 percent good. And I'm going to see to it that in the future all boyhicles and girlhicles and all men - and womenmobiles are 100 percent good. Now go away and leave me alone!"

"All right, Housing," Axle said, "if that's the way you want it, we will. But I'm going to send back a servo-mechanic to take care of you. So you just stay where you are until he gets here, and forget about that piece of junk in your back seat. You're a sick manmobile, Housing."

"Go away, go away, go away!"

AFTER they had gone, Housing sighed. Upon the fenders of menmobiles such as he invariably fell the moral responsibility for the whole vehicular race.

He waited till the sun wheeled higher into the sky, till morning traffic was at its thickest; then he started himself up, returned to the side road, and rolled back to

the highway. Ignoring the protests of his pain-racked body, he opened himself up wide. There were plenty of menmobiles available, but a mere manmobile wouldn't do. He needed a tractormanmobile - and trailerette. Presently he saw one approaching. Ejecting his servo-pilot, he swerved into the opposite lane. He met the tractormanmobile head-on, and when the impact telescoped him he molded himself around the Holy Grille and made it an inseparable part of himself. They could never take it away from him now. Never. And when he was reprocarnated, it would be reprocarnated too.

* * *

Housing retained awareness till the very end. He retained it while he was being hauled to the Redskin Run scrap yard. He retained it while he was being stripped of the various parts and pieces of him that were still usable. He retained it while he lay for weeks and months, rusting in the sun and the rain. He retained it when the huge press squeezed him to a fraction of his former size. He retained it while he was being transported to the Redskin Run Reprocarnation Plant stock

yard. He retained it when the big magnet crane picked him up and dropped him into one of Heat #4986's charging pans. He retained it during the brief trip up to the open-hearth floor. He retained it when the charger picked up the charger pan and shoved it through the middle door of Furnace #28 and dumped him on the limestone-littered furnace floor. He retained it during the rest of the scrap charge. He retained it during melting stage, rejoicing now as he felt Deerborn manmobile's metal mingling with his own. He retained it when the molten ore from the blast furnaces came cascading into the melt. He began to spread out then, to permeate the bath; to become, with the Holy Grille, a part of future manmobilekind. To become the basis of the new order that would endure when his and Deerborn manmobile's atoms were at last distributed throughout the whole of manmobilekind. The goodness of the Grille became more and more manifest as it blended with the old. Finally the oxygen lances came on, and the last particles of Housing became one with the vehicular race.

THE END



Philip José Farmer: Sex & Science Fiction

By SAM MOSKOWITZ

ONE of the most extraordinary and significant things about science fiction is its almost total lack of sex, even of fake sex—except, of course, in the ‘mad scientist’s’ operating-chambers particularly prominent in the movie versions,” states G. Legman. (Legman is blurbed as the principal living specialist in erotic folklore in *The Horn Book, Studies in Erotic Folklore and Bibliography* [University Books, 1964].)

As a generality, Legman’s point is valid; but his investigations into the field made before he moved to the French Riviera in 1949 were superficial, and he apparently has lost contact with it altogether since that time. If he had not, he could scarcely have remained oblivious to the impact made by a midwesterner (with the regionally appropriate name of Farmer) on the field of science fiction with a short novel, *The Lovers*, in *STARTLING STO-*



RIES, Aug., 1952. It fathered a brief but traumatic revolution contributing towards the maturation of science fiction.

An introductory blurb by Samuel Mines, editor of *STARTLING STORIES*, said of *The Lovers*: “We think this story is a delicate and beautiful, yet powerful and

shocking piece of work . . . We think that Philip Jose Farmer is the find of the year."

To his readers, in a department titled *The Ether Vibrates*, Mines made a further telling point: "... we think *The Lovers* is an important story. Important not necessarily because it is great literature but because it will make a lot of fine writers sit up and be quoted as blurting: 'My gosh, I didn't know we could do anything like that in science fiction!' or words to that effect."

He was, from the vantage of hindsight, 100 per cent right. The controversial element in *The Lovers* stemmed from the following story line: An earth ship lands on a planet where the man-like dominant species evolved from insect forms. A "human" race once lived there, too, infiltrated by a parasitic form of insect that grew into the precise form of a woman. These parasites, the *lalitha*, were all female and could breed only by mating with a human male. Upon becoming pregnant, the mother would die and the larvae would feed on her flesh until they were mature enough to emerge. It was discovered by the *lalitha* that heavy drinking of a foul-smelling liquor made from beetle juice prevented pregnancy. When an earthman, Yarrow, unaware of the true nature of the *lalitha*, enters into an affair with one

named Jeanette he becomes so fond of her that he waters her beetle juice to cure her of what he thinks is a leaning towards alcoholism. The result is conception, and death.

This poignant and tragic love story was clothed in unparalleled richness of background and related with a fascinating, absorbing technique. For its creation, Farmer owed a debt to easily a score of writers. But what he did with the elements he utilized became singularly and uniquely his own.

For instance, the smoothly handled incorporation of sex in the story he may have picked up from L. Sprague de Camp, whose *Rogue Queen*, describing the methods of procreation and social mores in a humanoid society patterned after the bees, had appeared in hard-cover form from Doubleday in the spring of 1951. Many of the characteristics of the Wogs, the dominant insect race of Farmer's alien planet, were taken from L. Frank Baum's *The Marvelous Land of Oz*, which had a famed character named The Woggle Bug. If any further evidence is desired as to the Baum influence, the planet in question is named Ozagen. The handling of the alien creatures owes much to Stanley G. Weinbaum. The stylistic modernity and the careful build-up of future civilizations is reminiscent

of Robert A. Heinlein. To say all this is no more disparaging than to say that Bradbury exhibits a paradoxical blend of the styles of Ernest Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe; for what Bradbury has done with his method is distinctly apart, and what Farmer has homogenized from his literary godfathers represents an achievement.

IT was not the end result that other science fiction writers admired in Farmer, but merely the sensationalism of his using biological sex as the central theme. This represented to them the breaking of taboos. Their reaction was immediate. A California author, Sherwood Spring, rushed a story he had written over a year previously to Sam Mines. It appeared as *No Land of Nod* in the Dec., 1952, *THRILLING WONDER STORIES*, and concerned the problem of the continuation of the race when the last man and woman on earth are father and daughter. The reverse situation was set up when the last woman on earth, pregnant, realizes she must have a son if the race is to continue. This was the plot of a story by Wallace West, appropriately titled *Eddie for Short*, (*AMAZING STORIES*, Dec., 1953).

From that point on, the science fiction writers decided to become really daring. At the fore-

front was Theodore Sturgeon, with *The World Well Lost* (*UNIVERSE SCIENCE FICTION*, June, 1953) where two lovebirds from another planet turn out to be homosexual. For good measure, Sturgeon contributed *The Wages of Synergy* (*STARTLING STORIES*, Aug., 1953) which starts with the shocked reaction of a woman whose lover dies while they are in a sexual embrace.

It is possible that the s-f field was moving in the direction of sex anyway, and that *The Lovers* merely highlighted a movement. Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man* (*GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION*, Jan.-Feb.-Mar., 1951) had made it clear that the world of tomorrow would know what sex was all about; and Richard Matheson, in his novelet *Lover When You're Near Me* (*GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION*, May, 1952) centered his story around the telepathic seduction of an earthman by an alien female, physically abhorrent to him.

Yet despite this, science fiction has traditionally been surpassed in prudery only by the Frank Merriwell series. A visitor from another planet picking up the average issue of a magazine might not even suspect that there was such a thing as sex on Terra.

Even in hard-cover books, where a high price ensures an adult audience, sex has not been too common in science fiction. It

does appear as a prime motivator in S. Fowler Wright's novel *Deluge* (1928) where surviving males, after a world-wide inundation, battle for the possession of females. It probably contributed more to the sale of *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley than its philosophy, as was to have been expected with the encouragement of erotic play in children, feelies replacing talking pictures, and the popular pastime of Orgy Porgy. Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1931) projected the history of mankind's future for hundreds of millions of years to come, and made a point of detailing the sexual changes in the evolving race.

However even as early as 1930 hard-cover books no longer represented the mainstream of science fiction. They were already fringe elements. The body of science fiction, the real area of development, was in magazines. And in them everything was rigidly puritanical. The female of the species, when present at all, was usually a professor's daughter whose prime function was to be captured by and be rescued from some bug-eyed monster. Some psychologists have tried to read sexual implications into that plot device, but it is probable the readers were more correct than naive when they assumed the beast was simply hungry.

AMONG the rare and racy episodes that diligent research might uncover was a segment in *Via the Hewitt Ray* by a woman author, M. F. Rupert, published in the Spring, 1930, *SCIENCE WONDER QUARTERLY*. A ray takes Lucille Hewitt, daughter of its inventor, into the fourth dimension. There the leading civilization is entirely female, except for a few males permitted to live for breeding purposes. A little questioning, however, reveals to Miss Hewitt the scandalous fact that "the males whose intelligence average was below our mental standard but who had physical beauty were made sterile by a special process and housed on the thirteenth tier."

"But you don't need these sterile men," Lucille Hewitt reminds, "why do you keep them?"

"We changed a lot of things," she is candidly told, "but we were unable, without danger to the future of our race, to change the fundamentals of natural instincts. When we women have borne two children to the race we are not allowed to reproduce a third time. Nevertheless the old biological urge returns and then we find use for the sterile male."

"But that is downright immoral," Lucille objects.

Her guide refuses to be trapped in a discussion on morality and finally puts her down with the reply: "Well, to you,

with your present standard of morals it isn't right, but to us it is a highly efficient manner of settling our difficulties."

There were no repercussions from SCIENCE WONDER QUARTERLY readers to that "salacious" exchange, possibly because it comprised only a few paragraphs in an issue that otherwise lived up to the highest standards of Fred Fearnot.

The renamed WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY didn't get away with a zippy approach a second time. They published a satiric frolic by Don M. Lemon, *The Scarlet Planet*, in the Winter 1931, number. Thousands of girls inhabit a scarlet planet and thousands more rest in underground vaults in suspended animation. Some are blood-sucking vampires, others half-snake and half-woman with a narcotic gas formed from their tears. The earthmen who land there don't care. They romp around the world with a leer in their eyes and obviously motivated banter on their lips. Despite the fact that they make honest women out of two of the girls at the end of the novel, the readers didn't take to men who *thought* that way. Don M. Lemon had contributed fantasies to periodicals like ALL-STORY MAGAZINE since 1905, but this was to be his first and last appearance in a science fiction publication.

Outside of a few test-tube ba-

bies, the magazines steered remarkably clear of sex until the entrance of MARVEL SCIENCE STORIES in August 1938. The editor, Robert O. Erisman, decided that the opportunity was present for a bit of titillation. Henry Kuttner, who was eventually to become a major shaper of science fiction, had submitted several action pot-boilers. Erisman said he would buy them if some risqué passages—in the manner of HORROR TALES and TERROR TALES, which mixed sex and sadism—were interpolated. Kuttner revised four stories under his own and pen names in the first two issues to this formula. The howl of protest was such that all sex was dropped with the third issue of the magazine; the name of Henry Kuttner was so discredited in science fiction that it took him five years to reestablish his standing.

There were prominent voices that felt that this virtual ban on sex was wrong. Writing in the Dec., 1945 FANTASY TIMES, Thos. S. Gardner said: "Sex should be incorporated into science fiction as a standard life pattern and treated from all phases just as political systems are discussed . . . But just mention sex and one has not only a figurative fight but a literal fight on his hands. Sex is very, very tabu, and can cause the most violent disagreements possible. Just why that is

so is difficult to understand.”

G. Legman, *erotica* authority, presented a theory: “The reason for this (omission of sex from science fiction) is neither due to oversight nor external censorship, but the fact that the largest percentage of the audience for the *echt*-pulp science-fiction literature is composed of adolescent boys (who continue reading it even after they are grown up), who are terrified of women, of sex . . .”

But this fails to explain the absolute rejection of sexual material until Philip Jose Farmer’s *The Lovers*. The answer most probably is that science fiction is a literature of ideas. The people who read it are entertained and even find *escape* through *mental* stimulation. Both vulgar and artistic sex are available to them in countless forms if they wish it, but the type of intellectual speculation they enjoy is present *only* in science fiction.

Farmer’s stories were scientifically based on biology which happened to involve sex. The story could *not* have been written without the sexual elements. Not only was sex essential to the story, but *the concepts had never been previously used in literature in the history of mankind!* Because the presentation of thought-provoking speculations—sexual or otherwise—was a legitimate function of science fic-

tion, farmer succeeded where all others had failed. In doing so, he established a precedent and thereby became one of the prime movers of modern science fiction.

THE author of *The Lovers* was christened Philip Jose Farmer after his birth on Jan. 26, 1918, in North Terre Haute, Ind. The “Jose” was the first name of his father’s mother and the change to “Jo-say” was made by Philip himself, who resented being labeled after a woman and correctly decided it would lend color to the drabness of his last name, Farmer. His father was an electrical power engineer; his mother was Lucille Theodora Jackson.

One of five children, Philip had a happy and normal childhood. Even during the depression the family was adequately fed, clothed and housed. His problem was that, despite participation in high school dramatics and athletics, Philip suffered from a distinct inferiority complex and an extra-rigid puritanical streak. His spare time was heavily occupied with reading. Already Burroughs, Haggard, Doyle, and Verne were at the top of his preference list.

Farmer’s first job, in 1935, was summer work as a ground man for Illinois Central Power and Light in Peoria, Ind. He tried attending Bradley College during

1936-37 and then dropped out for full-time work as a ground man. He reentered Bradley in 1940, where he met Bette Virginia Andre, then a freshman. They were married in the spring of 1941. A first child, Philip Laird, was born in 1942; a second, Kristen, in 1945. To support his family Farmer worked as a laborer, billet-chopper and inspector for a steel company, attending school at night. He finally got his B.A. in English from Bradley in 1950.

Farmer had written imaginatively and at length since the fifth grade. His early efforts were all rejected. But the first sale was a good one. He had written a story called *O'Brien and Obrenov*, in which American and Russian soldiers jointly occupy a German town. They draw a chalk mark through the center of it, separating zones of influence. A Nazi war criminal, found and subdued, is flat on his back across the division line. He is held supine for days while O'Brien and Obrenov, the American and Russian commanders, negotiate over who is to claim him. The matter is solved when a statue of Goethe, with a sword in his hand, is pushed over, splitting the prisoner's head open. THE SATURDAY EVENING POST offered to buy the story if a drinking scene were excised. Farmer refused, and sent it to ARGOSY. They didn't want it, but

passed it on to their companion magazine, ADVENTURE, where it was purchased by editor Kenneth White and run in the March, 1946 number. Two more tries at ADVENTURE were refused. Farmer decided he just didn't "have it" and went back to working in the steel mill.

One evening in 1951, while scanning a book on biology, he related it to another volume he had recently read on ant parasites. He vividly recalled the use of that subject matter in Bob Olsen's *The Ant With a Human Soul* in AMAZING STORIES QUARTERLY, Spring-Summer, 1932. He began to amplify the possibilities of the subject matter, and the next thing he knew he was immersed in writing the first draft of *The Lovers*. The final version was turned down by Campbell at ASTOUNDING SCIENCE FICTION as "nauseating." H. L. Gold of GALAXY SCIENCE FICTION sent it back, and later offered varying justifications for the rejection including the fear that the story device of the rise of Israel to world power, and the springing of a new religion from a half-Jewish character, might be misunderstood. When the story was sent to STARTLING STORIES, it was first read by assistant editor Jerome Bixby, a well known author in his own right, who enthusiastically recommended it to Samuel Mines.

A MAN with a T-bone steak on his mind is not likely to be distracted by the offer of tasty *crepes suzettes*. So it was that Farmer's next story, a short titled *Sail On! Sail On!* was brushed aside by readers as an appetizer preceding heartier fare. That was a mistake.

Sail On! Sail On! is a story of a parallel world where Ptolemy has been proven right; where Roger Bacon is encouraged by the Church and begins an age of invention including electricity, radio and the electric light; where Columbus is turned down by Queen Isabella of Spain and sent out by the Church instead; and where frantic messages from outer space are decoded *too late to prevent the ships from sailing off the edge of the earth!* *Sail On! Sail On!* is destined to become a literary classic, not merely because of its clever ending, but because in planning and execution it can be termed no less than brilliant. Few who read the story are likely to forget the punch line: "*They had run out of horizon.*"

The lack of response to this story did not discourage Farmer. The readers' columns of *STARTLING STORIES* were still full of letters of comment on *The Lovers*, mostly laudatory. And Shasta Publishers, a Chicago firm specializing in science fiction, had contracted to put *The*

Lovers out in book form. On rush order, Farmer turned out a novelet for Hugo Gernsback's *SCIENCE FICTION PLUS* titled *The Bite of the Asp*, in which the protagonist is injected with a protein molecule which causes his body to expel matter which arouses an unreasoning fear in any living creature approaching too closely. It won an overwhelming first place in readers' preference from a return of 2,000 return-postage cards bound into the magazine.

Farmer's next novelet, *Mother*, appeared almost at the same time in the April, 1935, *THRILLING WONDER STORIES*. In many ways this story topped *The Lovers*. From reading a criticism of Freud, Farmer had conceived of a plot involving a literal return to the womb. The "womb," in this case, is a tremendous otherworldly female, outwardly resembling a rock-encrusted hill, forever stationary and able to reproduce only by attracting roving beasts with blasts of appropriate mating scents. Any moving creature that gets close is seized and dragged into a gigantic womb. When the trapped animal attempts to claw its way out of a prison of flesh and muscle, the irritation its claws produces on the womb walls provides the stimulus for conception. Having performed its function, the creature is then eaten.

Mother is a story of an earthman, always dependent on his mother, who is trapped by one of these organisms. The methods whereby he communicates with it, avoids destruction and then makes the gigantic womb his permanent home is a masterpiece of science fiction.

The announcement that a sequel to *The Lovers*, to be titled *Moth and Rust*, would appear in the June, 1953 STARTLING STORIES was big news in the science fiction world. But the story, a novel substantially longer than *The Lovers*, received only a lukewarm reception. It was not a sequel at all. The only points of similarity were that it took place in the earth culture that had made contact with the Wogs and the *lalitha*. Actually, it is a fast-moving cloak-and-dagger novel of the future, comparable in theme to *1984*. An outline of the nature of the sex included would suggest pornography. But in context, it must have proved rather disappointing to those who read the novel only for sexual kicks. Religion rather than sex is the major story ingredient. Farmer explores the rise and nature of hypothetical new religions of the future with the same scientific objectivity with which he previously outlined the sex life of aliens. This was true, too, of his handling of the touchy theme of *Strange Compulsion*—(SCIENCE-

FICTION PLUS, Oct., 1953) possible involuntary incest brought about through parasite infestation. It was treated so clinically that it almost slowed down the story.

BY the time of the 11th Annual World Science Fiction Convention in Philadelphia in 1953, Philip Jose Farmer seemed to be riding the crest of a wave. He was presented with the first of a series of awards (later to become known as "Hugos") as the best new science fiction author of 1952. Appropriately enough, the subject of his talk that day was "Science Fiction and the Kinsey Report."

The most dramatic event of the year for Farmer proved to be a contest sponsored by Shasta Publishers offering \$1,000 for the best new novel submitted, plus \$3,000 for paperback rights from Pocket Books, Inc. Farmer spent every working hour for 30 days producing a 100,000-word novel, *I Owe For the Flesh*. The plot dealt with all of humanity resurrected along the banks of a river 10 million miles long on a faraway planet, with Sir Richard Francis Burton brought to life as the major character. Sent in under the wire, *I Owe For the Flesh* won the contest.

In the early flush of accomplishment Farmer threw up his job for full-time writing. He

secured an agent to help him crack the big-time markets. When he sold *Queen of the Deep* to ARGOSY (March, 1954), about a robot Russian submarine which captures an American and then is outdone in a game of wits, man against machine, it appeared that he was really on his way. (This story is better known as *Son* in the 1960 Ballantine Books collection, *Strange Relations*.)

Undeterred by a number of rejections, Farmer next cracked THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION with *Attitudes*, the first of a series of tales about a space priest named Father John Carmody. Then complications set in with regard to *I Owe for the Flesh*. The full payment promised never came through because Shasta in financial trouble, delayed the checks for months. Finally Shasta failed. Farmer lost his house and his wife became ill. In desperation he secured a job with a local dairy. His literary career seemed to have blown up in his face. In a blue funk he ceased writing.

Stories continued to appear through 1954, but they had been previously written. Of special interest among these was a long novelet, *Rastignac the Devil*, which was published in the May, 1954, issue of Leo Margulies' new magazine, FANTASTIC UNIVERSE. Actually this story was related

to *The Lovers*, for the protagonist, Rastignac, will become the sire of Jeannette, the unfortunate *lalitha* that died for the love of the earthman Yarrow. Like *More Than Human* by Theodore Sturgeon, it explores the area of *gestalt* relationships. In this case they are made possible by the "skins," living organisms voluntarily worn by the inhabitants of the planet New Gaul which keeps them attuned to other wearers and pricks them like a physical conscience when they do wrong.

There are a wealth of fine ideas in this story, including a philosophical justification for a cult of violence (as opposed to Ghandian non-violence) to counter the conditioning leading to enslavement as result of the "skins." But, Farmer's omnipresent sense of humor, which grimaces forth in even the most solemn of his efforts, plays him false. *Rastignac the Devil* degenerates into a satiric farce where the "ancient secret" of using alcohol to get drunk renders the "skins" ineffective; and the obvious parody of Seabury Quinn's popular occult detective Jules de Grandin, with the exclamations of "*Sacre Bleu!*" by clergyman Father Jules, makes it impossible to take the story seriously.

This same wild sense of humor came close to blasting Farmer's reputation in *Daughter* (THRILLING STORIES, Winter, 1945), a se-

quel to *Mother*. Expecting something equally fascinating and thought-provoking, readers were treated to a high-comedy spoof on *Mother*, told in the vein of the parable of *The Three Little Pigs*. Actually, *Daughter* is clever and good fun, but after reading *Mother* the result is devastatingly disappointing.

ONLY a single story by Philip Jose Farmer appeared during 1955 and 1956. That was the not-altogether-successful novelet *Father* (FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, July, 1955). The ambitious plot concerned one gigantic "Man" who fathered an entire planet's life forms and offers a friend of Father Carmody a chance to play temporary god.

A minor success was scored with the novel, *The Green Odyssey*, published as an original paperback by Ballantine Books, June, 1957. The very humor which frequently misfired in Farmer's other works engagingly redeems the saga of an earthman stranded on a far planet in medieval stage of development. Perhaps it was L. Sprague de Camp's special wit that made Farmer so fond of that author; but not only does *The Green Odyssey* bear some relationship to the Krishna stories but *The Alley Man*, (FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, June, 1959) was unquestionably a different ap-

proach on de Camp's *The Gnarly Man*. It attempted a prolonged slice-of-life character sketch of a Neanderthal man who has survived to the present day. It succeeded as a character sketch but almost failed as science fiction.

A story written under the title of *My Sister's Brother* (and which was published as *Open to Me, My Sister*) ranks with *The Lovers* and *Mother* as one of Farmer's best. It was rejected by Campbell with a comment to the effect that the physical descriptions and implications nauseated him. Campbell was not being crude or inaccurate. Farmer's outline of the method of reproduction of a race of very humanlike Martians was enough to unsettle even unsqueamish stomachs. Still, unpleasantly or not, Farmer had something to say and the rich, imaginative fabric he brocaded in presenting the Martian culture was the work of an inspired master craftsman.

Robert Mills, editor of FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION had also rejected the story. It was then accepted by Leo Margulies, and under the title of *The Strange Birth* was actually set in type for the June, 1959 SATELLITE SCIENCE FICTION. But the magazine was killed before any copies were run off the presses. (Several sets of page proofs were run off and exist as collector's items.) Mills then changed his mind

about the story and summoned the courage to publish it as *Open to Me, My Sister* in the May, 1960 FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION. Beyond its story quality, *Open to Me, My Sister* was an indication of Farmer's psychological recovery from his bitter disappointments.

Not that any smooth sailing lay ahead. FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION promptly rejected a nov-
elet titled *The Screaming Goddess*. Horace L. Gold, editor of GALAXY MAGAZINE, asked Farmer to expand the story into a "Galaxy Novel," one of a series of books to be published by Beacon Books. Titled *Flesh*, the enlarged story had the dubious distinction of being the only novel that Beacon cut because it was too hot to publish as written. The hero of *Flesh* is a significantly altered man, capable of prodigious orgies of virile prowess, who is utilized as a religious sex symbol in a carnal procession from Washington, D. C. to Poughkeepsie, N. Y. where he is ultimately

to be ceremonially slaughtered.

A seduction scene was written as an introduction to *Moth and Rust*, and it, too, enjoyed the special privilege of appearing in 1960 as a Galaxy/Beacon effort under the provocative title of *A Woman A Day*. Then, a try at a "mainstream" novel in *Fire and the Night* was issued as an original paperback by Regency Books, Chicago, in 1962. The theme involved an affair between a married Negro woman and a white man. The question the reader asks himself throughout, and which Farmer Freudianly answers at the end, is, what did the woman have to gain by the relationship?

IT is always difficult to appraise a writer who is not only contemporary, but whose major contributions are probably still ahead of him. Nevertheless, certain things can be said of Philip Jose Farmer.

At his worst, he can be undisciplined, verbose, in bad taste,

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and indiscriminate in his blend of literary influences. There are times when he works so hard at character development that he slows the pace of the story. When it comes to ideas, he often lacks a sense of proportion: on one hand he will nurse a pet notion through 20,000 precisely developed words as though that were the last note of originality he would ever strike; on the other hand he will throw ideas like a boxer aiming a haymaker.

At his best, Farmer ranks at the very top of all new writers to emerge from science fiction during the decade of the Fifties. No single new author in that era approaches him in strength, originality and fecundity of ideas. Few authors in the history of the field match his ability to exploit the implications of imaginative concepts. He is able to do this because his literary roots are deep. His immense respect for logical extrapolation dates back to Hugo Gernsback, and be-

cause of this most of his stories breathe that legendary "sense of wonder." When not rushed, he is topped only by Theodore Sturgeon and Richard Matheson in adaptability of style or word pattern to fit a special situation. Lack of bias in his work extends to his writing technique, which incorporates much of what is good from both new and old science fiction as well as from the literary world outside.

Despite the spontaneous acclaim accorded some of his works, Philip Jose Farmer is still underrated. This rises from a tendency to credit his reputation to sensationalism and from the appearance of a sizable portion of his fiction in secondary and lightly regarded markets. The facts show that Farmer is much more than a mere taboo breaker. In a field as sensitive to sex as science fiction, taboo-breaking should not be permitted to disguise the fact that Farmer is a story-teller of high artistry.

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THE DAY THEY FOUND OUT

By LES DENNIS

*There are insanities in life . . . Neither
the good nor the bad can escape them.
But how do you teach this to a child?*

PETER HOLBROOK took a pair of freshly pressed khaki pants out of the closet and dug down into the bottom of a bureau drawer for a shirt that was a bit frayed around the collar.

He slipped them on and looked in the mirror. Neat enough, he thought. No one expected the ninth grade teachers to be dressed up for Recognition Day.

He put on a sports jacket—he could take it off when he got to class. A tie? No, that would not be necessary.

Peter stepped quickly down the stairs from the second floor apartment he rented on Garden Street. He whistled a little, then stopped self-consciously, his lips forming a noiseless curse. He should be used to this by now, damn it, he told himself.

It was oppressively hot and hu-

mid and the smell of new-cut grass hung sweetly in the air. Drops of perspiration glistened on Peter's forehead and his shirt stuck annoyingly to his back.

Here and there a gardener, who had arrived early, used shears on the hedges or ran a power mower over the lawns, the sound of the motor breaking the morning silence which bore down on the town this day. The gardeners worked with their heads bent, each with his face set in a serious mask. Recognition Day was something they did not wholly understand and instinctively they feared it.

Occasionally a maid or cook would appear at the door of a home and watch Peter walk by. He walked this way every morning and they knew him well, but today they just stared at him.

Peter could feel their eyes on the back of his neck and the arteries in the side of his head began to throb.

Why didn't they stop that insane staring? It was a question that had no answer. The older ones, who remembered other times, would never stop.

ASIDE from the gardeners and maids, the streets were deserted. The men of Baisley had long since departed for work, for jobs of importance behind high-gloss desks in skyscrapers of glass and steel. Some would return tonight with presents for their youngsters. The gift-giving, Peter thought, was a practice which should be discouraged.

As Peter neared school, the streets began to show signs of life. Students walked in twos and threes. Many had been his pupils in other years and they gave him a special sign, a nod or wink to exchange an unspoken secret.

Alex Owens, a tall, blond boy whom Peter had taught last year rode past on his bicycle, then turned and stopped when he saw his former teacher.

"Today's the day," Alex said, seriously.

Peter smiled.

"Yes, I guess it is," he said.

"You have my brother, Michael, in your class this year," Alex said.

"Of course. Is he ready?"

"Sure," said Alex. "He's been talking about it for weeks."

Peter gave him a dark look. "You haven't told him . . ."

"No," replied Alex importantly. "Nobody tells kids what Recognition Day is all about. That would spoil it."

Peter agreed silently that it would.

"Anyway," Alex continued, "Michael has this little brown and white bunny. He calls it President Paterson." He paused for a moment. "Do you think it's wrong naming a rabbit after the President of the United States?"

A laugh flickered in Peter's eyes and he said he didn't see anything wrong with that.

"Michael brought the rabbit to school last week," Peter said. "They seem to be very much attached to each other."

"Mike is such a kid," Alex said, looking down at his shoes. "I mean he just doesn't seem to know . . ."

There was an ominous, awkward silence and Peter made a conscious effort to change the subject.

"What about you, Alex," he asked. "Do you understand better this year?"

"Sure. Especially history. I guess that's the way it's supposed to work."

"As far as school goes," said Peter, feeling himself slipping into his professional tone. "But

of course it should do more than that . . .”

“It did,” Alex said, smiling.

Peter looked closely at Alex. There was a change, an element of maturity that had been missing a year ago. On the surface, Alex seemed like any other teenager. But there was a difference, and Peter had seen it in others in Baisley. It was not the way they looked, but the way in which they looked—with eerie understanding.

The two parted. Over Alex’ shoulder, Peter could see Baisley School. It was a perfectly symmetrical building, a circle with corridors that formed spokes leading to a central auditorium and cafeteria.

Architects had designed it so that students walking from class to class could move easily and swiftly. Each classroom was carefully laid out so that outside light would not glare on the chalk board making algebraic equations and scientific postulates difficult to read. Artificial light, of ideal intensity, illuminated the books the students held.

And out of this perfection, Peter thought, this day became a necessity.

WHEN Peter reached the school, he picked his way through small groups of students who stood chatting hap-

pily. All had their pets, the projects they cared for from the beginning of the year. They held rabbits, which nestled against their cheeks, compared puppies for color and size and allowed kittens to gambol playfully on the school lawn.

Peter did not hear them greet him, although he saw them wave hello, felt the warmth of their smiles. This was the hardest part for Peter, the not smiling back, the detachment which gave meaning to the event. He felt in his inside pocket for his mimeographed speech. It was there, softened and beginning to tear from repeated foldings. It gave him confidence.

Peter spoke to no one and stepped inside the building.

He was seated behind his desk—specially covered with heavy boards—when the children, laughing, clutching their pets, entered. There was confusion and a holiday mood. Once or twice a dog darted out of the grasp of a distracted youngster and bolted across the room, only to be coaxed back affectionately by its owner or retrieved by a classmate.

The bell had not rung and Peter let the noise surround him. Trance-like, he bathed in it, yet scarcely heard it. It was an avalanche of noise, with no individual character. The children who pinched and poked and giggled

around their desks each acted a dumb show.

In the first seat of the first row, Michael Owens hugged a ball of softness named President Paterson. Behind him, Cathy McCarthy lifted her tiger-striped kitten to her desk and stroked its head. Richard Rober had a parakeet; Ronald Fernland a black toy poodle which, held by a leash, pranced near his seat.

The bell rang and there was a quick, tense silence. Peter went to the door and locked it.

Then he carefully unfolded the mimeographed sheet. (Easy, he told himself, show neither pleasure nor pain.) He began to put the explanation of Recognition Day into his own words, then decided not to and leaned over and read from the paper.

"Recognition Day," he heard himself reading aloud, soberly, "is based on the belief that life is capricious . . ."

He looked up and saw inquisitive faces. "Or illogical and sometimes unfair," he ad-libbed.

"And only if we recognize this," he read on, "can we accept life for what it is with its injustices and absurdities."

The prepared speech made him sound monotonous, dull. He was losing them again.

"Look," he said desperately, "someplace in this whole thing we call education there has to be some hint, some (he searched for

a better word) sign that just because you're diligent and loving and good . . ."

His voice trembled and sounded vaguely metallic. The class leaned forward. (This is all wrong, he thought, this has to be done without emotion or it's not good.)

". . . Just because you know the theorems, doesn't mean you know the world."

THE toy poodle barked and was tugged by its master. Peter looked down and tried to pick up the threads of his prepared speech.

"There are insanities," he read, "which we must be prepared for."

Peter looked up again. The class had grown strangely silent.

"Now will you please line up along the right wall with your pets," Peter said.

Michael Owens glared at Peter, instinctively resentful. He held his rabbit to his chest. And then, because Michael was an obedient, well-behaved boy, he got up slowly from his seat and stood next to the wall.

Cathy McCarthy, holding the kitten on a string, got up and stood behind Michael and the rest of the class lined up to the rear.

Peter beckoned to Michael and the boy brought the brown and white rabbit forward and—fol-

lowing the teacher's nod—placed it on a board atop the desk.

Peter felt the perspiration pouring down his flushed face as he bent down and opened a flannel-lined case in the bottom desk drawer.

"Move out of the way so the class can see," he directed Michael.

Michael stood motionless.

"For God sake, move," Peter shouted. The frightened student jumped to one side and Peter had to lunge to prevent the rabbit from hopping to the floor.

Holding the animal with one hand, Peter reached into the lower drawer and withdrew a large, glistening meat cleaver from the flannel-lined case.

He raised the cleaver high above his head as the children stared, transfixed.

Then swiftly he brought the blade down. It cut silently through the air, through the soft body of the rabbit and imbedded itself with a crash in the thick wooden board.

Blood squirted from the cleaved body of the rabbit and splattered across Peter's shirt-front.

The children shrieked, holding their animals close to their stiffened bodies. Their eyes filled with tears, confusion and fathomless hatred. Their screams carried out of the window and across the schoolyard to destroy the quiet of the dozing town.

A small, dark-haired boy darted out of line and threw himself against the locked classroom door, frantically wrenching the knob. Then slowly, his face expressionless, he turned and returned to his place in line.

And gradually, the shrieks turned to moans—a kind of age-old keening out of the mouths of children.

Then Peter knew the worst was over. He motioned to Cathy McCarthy, who shielded the tiger-striped kitten in her arms.

"Bring the kitten up, Cathy," he said without emotion. "It's next."

THE END

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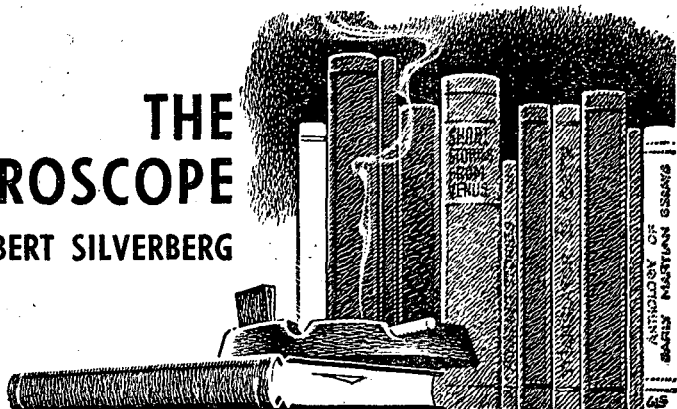
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THE SPECTROSCOPE

By ROBERT SILVERBERG



The Dark Side of the Earth, by Alfred Bester. 160 pages. Signet, 50¢.

Alfred Bester is a television writer who served his literary apprenticeship in the science fiction pulps more than twenty years ago. Over the last thirteen years he's been an infrequent but steady contributor to s-f, publishing two brilliant novels, *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination*, and one or two short stories a year. His work is marked by dazzling style and virtuoso plotting; if sometimes there seems to be all surface and not much else, that's a forgivable enough lapse considering the stunning sheen of those surfaces.

This new and uneven collection presents seven Bester stories, five of them reprinted from *Fantasy & Science Fiction* and

the other two never before published in any form. Only one of the seven makes use of the typographical tricks that are practically Bester's trademark: "The Pi Man," perhaps the best in the book, a lively, clever, and stylistically coruscating little story which embodies, I think, a brand new science fiction idea.

The rest are more conventional in tone. There's "The Men Who Murdered Mohammed," quite possibly the funniest time-travel story ever written; it takes a squint at the notion Ray Bradbury used in "A Sound of Thunder" and hilariously stands it on its head. Bester takes possession of another hoary theme in "They Don't Make Life Like They Used To," a surrealist last-man-on-Earth tale that moves at mile-a-minute pace

toward a strange and chilling resolution.

More minor is "Will You Wait?"—a grimly funny story of cosmic procrastination that will touch resonating chords in the hearts of anyone who has had to do business in what they currently call the communications industry, meaning writing, publishing, and advertising. And "Time Is The Traitor" carries the reader along on a novel notion, but dissolves into un-Besterlike sentimentality in its closing pages.

The two new stories in the book are both lamentable. "Out of this World" is a slick, empty job about a crossed telephone connection into another time-track, a theme which Henry Kuttner handled for keeps years ago. Bester's watered-down version makes light, diverting reading, but it seems to have been aimed at some mass-audience market. And words fail me when it comes to discussing "The Flowered Thundermug," a lengthy and astonishingly heavy-handed satire on Hollywood. It's not hard to see why this one failed to make it into print anywhere else, even carrying the author's illustrious byline.

But three first-rate stories and two pretty good ones, out of seven—that's good batting in anybody's league. This is a collection worth having.

The Wanderer, by Fritz Leiber. 318 pages. Ballantine Books, 75¢.

This magnificent novel is the book Fritz Leiber has been expected to give us for many years. The towering, awesomely commanding-looking Leiber can call spirits from the vasty deep, and they come, too, when he calls. But since his two classic novels of twenty-odd years ago, "Gather Darkness" and "Conjure Wife," Leiber has offered nothing with the power and devastating punch of this long work.

After too many years of writing slapstick farce ("The Green Millennium," "The Silver Eggheads," etc.), varied with an occasional Fafhrd-and-Gray-Mouser sword opera, Leiber now is deadly serious in this panorama of a world collapsing into chaos. His theme is the sudden appearance in our solar system of an unheralded new planet—not a new concept, of course, since there are at least two well-known predecessors, the Philip Wylie-Edwin Balmer "When Worlds Collide" of 1932 and the Max Ehrlich "The Big Eye" of 1949. Unavoidably, there is a debt to these two books, if only because they got there first. There are, after all, only so many ways of telling the story of such an event. The details may differ, but the basic psychological responses to the emergence of a new world in the sky will be the same.

What is specifically Leiberesque in this version of the story is the frequent and always unexpected manufacture of poetry out of mundane material. Just as a Leiber story of years ago worked witchcraft with the hissing sound of a defective neon sign, so here does he produce those spine-chilling touches again and again: in his descriptions of the invading planet itself, in his portrayal of a world racked by giant tides, in moment after moment of spontaneous wonder.

Technically, the book is a stunning tour-de-force. Although enormously long—well over 100,000 words—all the action takes place in a span of about three days. The unflagging pace is maintained through a cinematic technique of skipping from character to character, with a large and geographically diverse *dramatis personae*. This makes for some choppy reading at the start; in order to get all his characters introduced before bringing on his central cataclysm, Leiber occasionally is forced to compress his scenes desperately, and this results in such ugly dialog as this:

"David!" the novelist exploded. "You know perfectly well that this tidal power toy is merely a sop to people like myself who are against atomic power because of the weapons' aspect."

Luckily, such breathless prose is left behind as the story unrolls. Leiber stage-manages his big effects brilliantly; the arrival of the new planet itself is an overpowering moment, and the successive phases of the intruder call forth a steady flow of dazzling imagery. There is a final climax of miraculous scope, and its basically fantastic nature seems perfectly logical and natural, so well has Leiber laid the groundwork for it.

There is considerable attention to character development—another Leiber trademark. Freed of pulp taboos, he allows himself the luxury of writing as though sex were actually a meaningful human activity, and, unsurprisingly, there is a good deal of sexual activity. Most of it is of the usual kind, but the irrepressible Leiber throws in three remarkably bizarre sex scenes—one aboard a rollercoaster, another (a real shocker!) between two drowning people, and a third, aboard a flying saucer, about which I will offer no further hints.

Big as the novel is, it only hints at the real story that awaits telling. Leiber gives us two glances at that real story: one when a character is permitted to tour the invading world and glimpse its scope, and another when a different character, one of the aliens, describes the

universe from which the invader has come—a universe in which artificial planets are so thick that they blot out the light of the suns. (That second speech, by the way, is another prose lapse—not even an alien would talk in such a hifalutin tone—but the content overshadows the form.) It's up to Leiber to show us that galaxy at closer range next time.

Not the least of this book's many virtues is the permanent contribution it makes to the roster of science fiction's unforgettable alien characters. I mean the cat-woman, Tigerishka, a powerful and powerfully-realized character. Unless I miss my guess, Tigerishka will take her place with Worsel, Tregonsee, and some of Eric Frank Russell's alien beings in the s-f pantheon. I imagine we'll be seeing Tigerishka costumes at the World S-F Conventions for years to come.

And if this one doesn't carry off the 1964 Hugo for best novel of the year—well, there's just no justice, then.

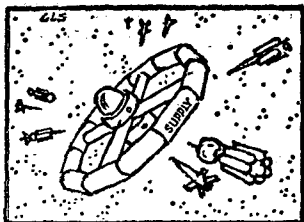
The Astounding Science Fiction Anthology, edited by John W. Campbell, Jr. 192 pages. Berkely Books, 50¢.

In 1952, Simon & Schuster published a jumbo collection

of twenty-three stories from John Campbell's *Astounding*—the magazine that goes under the name of *Analog* nowadays. Bearing the same title as this paperback reprint, the anthology presented some of the finest stories of one of s-f's golden ages.

Here now is a reissue of just nine of the stories from the original volume. It's still a hefty helping of fiction in itself, though, both in terms of quantity and quality. Two of the stories are masterpieces that must rank permanently as classics: Isaac Asimov's "Nightfall" and Murray Leinster's "First Contact." I envy the reader who comes to these two for the first time.

The rest indicate the sort of magazine Campbell was editing in the 1940's, when they all appeared. Outstanding are Clifford Simak's "Eternity Lost," Lewis Padgett's wry "When the Bough Breaks," and A. E. van Vogt's haunting if occasionally foggy "Vault of the Beast." The others—"Over the Top" by Lester del Rey, "Invariant" by John Pierce, and "Cold War" by Kris Neville—would warrant a higher ranking in any other company, but the competition is rough in this volume. Buy it by all means, if you weren't around to read them the first time.



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